

ONLINE RELIGION AS LIVED RELIGION
METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS
PARTICIPATION ON THE INTERNET

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One of the greatest difficulties in studying religion on the Internet is keeping pace with its rapid developments and changes. This has been a significant issue when developing theoretical frameworks for examining religious participation on the World Wide Web. Religion has always had a significant online presence, but it is a shifting environment with the number of sites increasing rapidly,¹ and the types of sites created changing significantly with the advancements of new technologies. When I first proposed my theoretical distinction for online religion and religion online I did so based upon an examination of the religious based websites available to me at the end of 1999.² At that time there was a clear distinction between religious websites where people could act with unrestricted freedom and a high level of interactivity (online religion) verses the majority of religious websites, which seemed to provide only religious information and not interaction (religion online).

Examining the websites at that time, there was also a correlation between official religious groups and religion online and non-official religious websites and online religion. Although it was not absolute, in that many 'home made' religious web pages offered only information, it appeared that religious institutions were reluctant to develop open and interactive areas on the WWW. Areas where people could interact, share or argue about their religious beliefs, or even participate in online ceremonies appeared to be provided by non-official and popular religious groups or by commercial ventures such as Usenet. However, over the last five years official religious organizations have adapted to the online environment and have changed the manner in which they allow for online interaction. Despite these changes, the heuristic framework of online

¹ For example, in the Yahoo directory for Religion and Spiritual Beliefs, the category containing Christian websites increased by 234 sites over a 24 hour period in August of 2002. Over that same period of time there were 54 new Jewish sites, 38 new sites on Islam, 32 new sites on Buddhism, and 10 new sites on Divination.

² See Helland 2000, 205-224.

religion and religion online is still applicable, but it too needs to develop to keep pace with the alterations that have occurred on the Internet medium.

To advance the religion online / online religion framework, I will draw from the most detailed critique and examination of this earlier work, which was presented by Glenn Young. In Young's critique he specifically addresses the issue of interactivity and religious participation at official and non-official websites by recognizing two distinctions within the online religion / religion online framework. "These are: (1) the provision of information about religion versus the opportunity for participation in religious activity, and (2) primary reference to offline, pre-existing religious traditions versus primary reference to religious activities taking place online."³

Examining these issues, Young recognizes that an absolute distinction between online religion (where people are allowed the opportunity to participate in religious activity), and religion online (where people are given information about religion) may not be the best interpretation of religious interaction at websites. Instead, Young argues:

If religion online and online religion are treated as two theoretical endpoints, then the issues of information provision versus religious participation, and primary reference to online versus offline activity, can be understood as two axes which extend between them.⁴

This view is also shared by Douglas Cowan,⁵ who recognizes that within the online neo-pagan tradition, vast majorities of the websites fall in between these two areas. Cowan argues that although there are sites that provide either religion online or online religion, a significant number of neo-pagan and Wicca sites are trying to bridge the gap between the two and offer both.

By examining representations of the Christian belief system on the Internet, Young tries to draw this same conclusion. He interprets these levels of online religious participation as axis points within a range, not as two separate spheres. Within the case studies presented by Young, he argues that "even at the relatively simple level of congregational Christian Web sites which deal with an individual church community, there are examples where information and participation conjoin".⁶ To support his argument, Young demonstrates that some official church sites, such as www.standrewkc.org, may have features such as an "Online Prayer Request Form". In this case, individuals can send their prayer request to the church, giving them some level of opportunity to interact with the website. Another official church site (www.aic.org) has a "Prayer

³ Young 2004, 93.

⁴ Young 2004, 94.

⁵ See Cowan 2005.

⁶ Young 2004, 94.

Request Page”, where people’s prayer requests are placed online for others to view. In both cases, it demonstrates that, “a Web site largely concerned with a one-way flow of information from the church as representative of the Christian faith to the Web site visitor now invites a reciprocal flow of information, and perhaps activity ... ”⁷

Although it is important to recognize that there is a spectrum, or axis, when it comes to assessing online religious participation at the websites, you cannot discount issues of control related to interaction levels. Using Young’s examples, at Alive in Christ,⁸ people are allowed to post prayer requests, however, the site may be censoring the prayers that are allowed to be posted, and in the section on “current prayer concerns” there is only one prayer posted from 2002 and three prayers from 2004. In the case of Saint Andrews,⁹ where people are allowed to click on the icon for an “Online Prayer Request”, it is important to recognize that this is a very minimal form of online-religious interaction, since clicking on the icon originally created a pop-up window that allowed the individual to send the church an email. Recently this was changed to allow for an online prayer request form similar to the AIC website but this is still representative of one-to-many communication rather than any form of many-to-many communication or interaction.

To strengthen the argument, Young presents examples that demonstrate some level of interaction can occur even at an official denominational website. His primary case supporting this comes from the United Methodist Church¹⁰ where Young finds that the site includes only information. However, there is a link page available that directs people to areas where such things as prayer instruction, devotional information, and “suggestions for a thought and prayer focus for the day” are available. People can also sign up to receive a daily email where a devotional prayer will be sent to them. For Young, “the Daily Devotional page represents a shift away from the simple reception of information to a more complex participation in the activity of prayer”.¹¹

Despite this example demonstrating that an organization structured primarily for religion online, such as the United Methodist Church, does allow for activity, it must be recognized that people are still receiving information rather than contributing to any form of online interaction.

⁷ Young 2004, 95.

⁸ Website of Alive in Christ.org, from: <http://www.aic.org>.

⁹ Website of Saint Andrew’s Episcopal Church.org, from: <http://www.standrewkc.org>.

¹⁰ Website of United Methodist Church.org, from: <http://www.umc.org>.

¹¹ Young 2004, 96.

Although they can point and click their mouse, that action can only be used to receive information. It still represents the use of the medium by the organization in a form of one-to-many communication.

It is clear that there are a variety of religious websites available and that there are also a variety of forms of religious participation available to those who go online. As technology has developed, it is easier for a website designer to create an area, such as a chat room or BBS, where interactions can take place. However, technological limitations have never been an issue for the larger institutionalized religious organizations. What this tells us is that despite the technology being readily available for religious based websites to provide both religion online and online religion, not all of them do. This is important because the type of communication and interaction occurring effects the online religious environment.

Religious organizations and institutions are very conscious of the way their websites function. Nothing appears on the Internet out of chance or by accident, in fact a significant amount of time, money, and thought are required to develop an institutional religious website.¹² The manner in which religious groups structure their websites directly influences the type of communication and interaction that can occur. As Manuel Castell argues, the Internet is ideally designed for many-to-many communication, which represents a form of networked interaction that is significantly different from the form of one-to-many communication used by centralized hierarchies.¹³ The groups that are allowing for online religion are in many ways representative of a networked form of religious interaction and participation, which is significantly different from groups that are using the medium to support their hierarchical ‘top down’ religious worldview. Online religion is in some ways reminiscent of the Protestant Reformation, in that the Church and the priesthood are no longer considered an important intermediary between the people and their religious practice. Many-to-many communication does not need a hierarchy to function, but rather relies upon an open and equal level of participation by all members. This has significant implications concerning how religion functions as a cultural system, since there is considerably more to religion than just information. Clifford Geertz argues that religion provides a “model of” understanding our place within the cosmos and a “model for” guiding and directing our human activity. However, in order for people to really accept and embrace a particular religious

¹² See Helland 2000.

¹³ See Castells 2001, 2.

worldview, they have to “do” the religion — this occurs through the way they live, the way they interact, and the rituals they participate in.¹⁴

However, this raises the significant theoretical problem of determining what constitutes “doing” religion on the Internet. More specifically, what constitutes online religion? Using the earlier examples presented by Young in his critique of the online religion framework, to establish that sending an email requesting a prayer to a church organization is a form of online religion requires an interpretation of the activity as both being “religious” and also interactive. Young recognizes that this is a problem and states that, “One could of course question whether making a prayer request is itself prayer, but this would be difficult to answer without knowing the minds of those who use the prayer request form”.¹⁵

Due to the subjective nature of religious experience, it is hard to determine if certain cases of online activity are or are not religious. This also raises the question concerning the methods employed to establish this assessment, since traditional frameworks are based upon the offline religious world. A primary example can be seen in the act of reading religious scriptures. On many official websites sacred scriptures are available to be read online.¹⁶ In fact, scriptural content is quite common at both official and non-official sites; this includes the Koran, Hebrew Scriptures, New Testament, the Book of Mormon, Gnostic texts, and an amazing assortment of other works. Yet is reading scripture a religious act? Further more, is reading scripture from a website an enactment of an online religious practice? In many ways, the only possible way to answer these questions is by focusing upon the participant’s perception and their subjective interpretation of that event.

To address this issue, Young modifies the work of John Austin (1970), developing his conception of “performative utterances”. Young modifies the concept to argue that online religious practice is a type of speech act, where the participant is saying something that is actually doing something, and doing something while they are saying something. In this way, websites that contain information, which the person reads out loud, and also a participatory quality can allow for some form of online religion.

The example used by Young is the *Church For All Website*,¹⁷ where after accepting a statement of faith, an individual has the ability to click an icon to join the organization. Young

¹⁴ See Geertz 1966, 1-46.

¹⁵ Young 2004, 95.

¹⁶ For example see the website of the *Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* at <http://www.lds.org>.

¹⁷ Website of Church of All.org, from: <http://www.churchofall.org>.

argues that the combined act of reading, or saying, the statement, along with clicking the mouse on an icon is equivalent to a performative utterance, and therefore an act of online religion.

Although this framework is helpful, it is limited in its application. First and foremost, how many people actually read the text of a licensing agreement before they click the “OK” button to install software. How is it possible to determine if the person clicking their mouse on the icon to join the church has read the information and is acting with that intent in mind? Although Young argues “it would, we can assume, be pointless to make such a declaration if one did not also hold the substance of that declaration to be true ...”¹⁸ I disagree, since I clicked on the link just to see what would happen and I’m sure others have done the same.

This raises a key issue and concern when studying religion on the Internet: What action or online activity can be considered a genuine religious action? How is it possible to determine if the people practicing forms of online religion are in fact conducting actual religious activities and having genuine religious experiences? As ritual studies recognize, it is not merely the action that makes an activity religious, rather it is the intent behind the action that gives it its religious significance. For example, lighting a candle may or may not be considered a religious event; it is dependant upon the situation and also the interpretation of the participants. The same holds true for clicking hyperlinks on websites. People may or may not be undertaking the activity to obtain a true religious experience. In many ways, evaluating the activity focuses upon the authenticity of the event and this is something that is extremely problematic to determine.

To overcome this difficulty, it requires that the researcher make some form of assessment based upon what can be observed. Much like viewing a ritual in the off-line environment, a participant observer can gage (to one degree or another) the authenticity of the experience for the practitioners. Although this is not absolute, within the field of religious research it is not an uncommon methodological approach. Applied to the online environment,

... the apparent authenticity of a religious activity or experience will play a determinate role ... in whether the Internet will become a forum for core religious activities and serious religious engagement. Consequently, those wishing to study this possibility must come to grips with the ‘authenticity’ of religious experiences as a key descriptive category, explicitly or implicitly invoked by the people they are studying.¹⁹

¹⁸ Young 2004, 99.

¹⁹ Dawson forthc. 2005.

To demonstrate the varying levels of religious authenticity on the Internet, and how they can be approached for evaluation, I will use two case studies of online religious activity. The first concerns posting prayers and prayer requests, the second relates to performing online rituals.

Posting prayers and requesting prayers is perhaps the most frequent form of online religion occurring. Although this may not be as common in all religious traditions using the Internet, within the Christian environment this activity appears regularly.²⁰ Despite being a frequent occurrence, the methods used to post prayers varies from site to site and highlights the varying levels of religious activity occurring online. This activity can involve sending an email to a church, filling out an online prayer form, posting a prayer or prayer request on a website for people to view, placing a prayer or prayer request in a BBS environment where others can respond, or using synchronous chat to pray or ask for a prayer in ‘real time’. Although each of these activities is a form of prayer or prayer request, they are decidedly different online occurrences.

For example, on the website www.catholic.org people have the ability to send a prayer request to the organization. However, this is a much more involved process than simply sending an email: the person must fill out a prayer request form. The form contains several required fields, meaning that certain questions must be answered before the form can be submitted. The questions include: first and last name, mailing address, phone number, gender, date of birth, the name of the Catholic school you may have attended, name of parish, name of diocese. Then there are four scroll-down selections that must be completed. The first requires your political party affiliation; answers include Republican, Democrat, Libertarian, Independent American and Green Party. The next three sections are called “Issues and Concerns”, and each section has the same 10 selections available. These are: Pro Life, Stem Cell, Homeland Security, Privacy Issues, Death Penalty, Separation of Church and State, Confessional Privacy, Protect our Children, Euthanasia, and Immigration. After this section of the questionnaire is completed, the person can type in a prayer request. However, before submitting the prayer they must also answer if they are willing to make a donation to the organization and if they would like to be placed upon an email mailing list.

The procedure at www.catholic.org is fairly complicated and in many ways may remove a sense of spontaneity from the act of praying. When examining this particular case of online

²⁰ As of 2003, Christianity represents more than 72% of all religious based websites, so this form of online religious activity is by far the most common.

activity, there is no way to evaluate the types of prayers being submitted or determine if they are genuine, since they are not made public. Although the people may be sharing their prayers with the religious organization, it represents a form of one-to-one communication and is a private matter between the church and the individual, much like a confession. Unfortunately, because it cannot be observed, this type of activity cannot be evaluated or studied by participant observation or an ethnographic examination of the Internet environment. To assess this form of private communication, either the church would have to divulge the prayers they are receiving or people sending prayers to www.catholic.org would have to be surveyed. In many ways this is the same problem researchers would face if they went into a real church setting. They can observe the rituals, the interactions among the participants, and a number of other activities, but they cannot go and sit in the confessional and listen to a private conversation. This type of activity represents the gray area of classification between online religion and religion online. There is no way to evaluate the activity taking place in the private space of a cyber-confessional. Although they are using the Internet to have some sort of interaction with a religious professional, for all we know, they could be talking about the weather.

An example of a more public prayer request can be seen in a case study from the Soc.religion.christian BBS network that occurred during the period of May 20th to June 4th, 2001. On May 20th, user “Olayinka Olaleye” began a discussion with the subject heading: “Pray for me”. In the short posting “Olayinka” asked for people to pray for her good marital relations, that she would do well in school and “Pray that my job will be waiting for me after graduation”. The initial response to the discussion thread came from user “Hiscoming” and was a genuine prayer:

Heavenly Father I pray for your child that You will have mercy and fulfill her heart desire. Have your way and your say regarding her marital life, academics and career. Lord, I pray that Your perfect will be fulfilled in her life in Jesus' name amen.
(soc.religion.christian 21-05-2001)

However, the next posting by “Thomas” (perhaps doubting Thomas) challenged Olayinka’s prayer request for being too materialistic. “Thomas” argued, “I would not feel comfortable praying for your financial success”. This began a serious discussion concerning what constitutes an appropriate prayer. “Thomas” was challenged over the next 7 posts with individuals quoting scriptures and questioning his position. For the most part, the arguments were well developed and supported with scriptural references. “Dave Mullenix” asked “Thomas”, “How do you feel about ‘Give us this day our daily bread’?” “Frank Roy” concluded the discussion by quoting 5 scriptural sources that defended the use of prayer to ask for material support.

This example of prayer request and prayer posting highlights the issue of online-religious interactivity and also authenticity. It appears that the user “Olayinka Olaleye” had the genuine intent of asking for online prayer support and the prayer response from “Hiscoming” also appears genuine. In this case, both people were practicing a form of online religious participation. Placing a prayer on a BBS is a public expression of religious faith that can be evaluated to determine if it is an authentic religious activity, and in this case it was. Although the other eight postings in the discussion thread were not prayers, they can also be considered manifestations of online religion because they were genuine expressions of religious beliefs and practices, placed within an interactive environment. Although they were not personally engaging in a form of prayer, they were engaging in a religious dialogue focused upon genuine faith-based concerns.

This case study also shows that not all the participants in the same online environment are having the same types of religious experiences or interactions. The Soc.religion.christian BBS has hundreds of regular participants, yet only a handful chose to post in response to Olayinka’s prayer request. This highlights an important issue. Just because people are in the environment, or clicking links, does not mean that they are doing online religion. Again, this demonstrates that there is more to evaluate online religion than just an examination of the setting or the links. The participants must be observable.

Another situation on the WWW where high levels of online religion appear to be occurring is during actual online religious rituals. Although one might think that all online ceremonies represent the same high level of activity, this is not the case. To demonstrate these differences I will examine two very different forms of online religious participation.

The first case study comes from the soc.religion.shamanism Usenet discussion group. On May 9, 1997, Usenet user “Father John Missing” began a discussion posting called “Invitation to online ritual”. From the posting, it appeared there was a regular group meeting for online ritual activities and that Father Missing was reminding people of the upcoming ritual on Tuesday night at 10 pm and encouraging others to participate. The group was called the “Creation Spirituality Celebration Circle” and appeared to be well organized and structured. Father Missing described the group as “a community scattered across the Earth who meet weekly for ritual and discussion” (soc.religion.shamanism 05/09/1997).

By researching the postings on the Usenet network and the Internet I was able to determine that Father John Missing was ordained to the priesthood of the American Catholic Church, Diocese of Central Florida. He structured the format for his online activity based upon another

online ritual group led by Father John Mabry on the AOL network. He began the weekly ritual meetings on March 25, 1997 and they continued for an indeterminable period of time. Unfortunately, I have not been able to contact Father Missing. Although he did begin the construction of a website called “Holy Resurrection Abbey: A Virtual Monastic Community”,²¹ it no longer appears active and his email address does not work.

Although the invitation for people to attend the online ritual has been preserved in the soc.religion.shamanism archive, no records were kept concerning the actual ritual events. They occurred as IRC chat and were not recorded. This is a serious issue in regards to online ceremonies. Although some groups post their ritual activity on their websites after they have been completed,²² many use chat rooms, telnet areas such as Cyber Coven Talker, or IRC, where the text messaging used to undertake the activity is not saved. However, the Creation Spirituality Celebration Circle did provide a format to structure their events, which was preserved. Their activity included participating in prayers, blessings and visualizations, and conducting a short ceremony.

Concerning the issue of authenticity, I have no doubt that Father Missing was an actual religious specialist conducting genuine online religious ritual services. Those that participated would most likely be genuine in their interests, since logging on to the IRC network at that time required some effort and technical know how. It was not as easy then as it is now to enter into synchronous real time chat. People who wanted to participate would need to make an effort to attend and also be required to meet at a certain time, which depending upon their time zone, could be quite inconvenient. These factors demonstrate a level of commitment that most likely represents genuine interest and authenticity. The online rituals were also very public events. Anyone who logged on to the IRC network and typed the command “/join #creationcelebrcircle blessing” Tuesday night at 10 pm EDT would be able to participate or watch the interaction.

Due to these factors, it is clear that there was a high level of religious activity occurring in this setting. People joined the Creation Spirituality Celebration Circle in order to bring their religious beliefs and practices to life. They shared information, prayed together, participated in group ceremonies and created an environment where religiosity could be expressed. This was an ideal example of online religion.

²¹ This website has been available on <http://www.angelfire.com/fl/FellowshipOfMercy/>.

²² See e.g. *The Dance* website at <http://www.thedance.com/rituals/>.

The second case study reveals that certain online ritual activities can in fact have low levels of online religious participation. This low level of activity can be seen by examining the e-communion ritual available at the Church of the Simple Faith.²³ The website belongs to a virtual church organization that practices a form of evangelical Christianity. On the website, there are clear directions provided for undertaking the “e-Communion” ceremony.

Before beginning the e-communion, the participants are told they will need to prepare by collecting a cup of juice (alcoholic beverages are not recommended) and a loaf of bread. They are also encouraged to follow two rules before beginning. First, they are to click a hyperlink leading to the biblical communion message. Reading this message is to establish that the online ceremony is “a serious service and is being done in remembrance of the sacrifice our Lord has made”. Those wishing to participate are also told that they should not rush the ceremony but rather plan to set aside 15 to 20 minutes. After the preparations are completed, the ceremony can begin when the participant clicks on the hyperlink for the “Communion Service Program”. The program consists of a page of text messages that the individual is to read and several instructions concerning the actions he or she should take. There are also two hyperlinks that are to be clicked, which provide the words for songs that are to be sung during the service.

Assessing the online religious participation occurring during this ceremony is difficult. First, it is impossible to gauge the intent of those using the website; there is no way to tell if they are practicing an authentic form of online ritual because they cannot be observed or evaluated. It is clear that the people who designed the website and ritual page did so to allow for a genuine form of religious experience, but there is no way to tell how, or even if, this ritual is being undertaken authentically. This is also a private event; you cannot join with others online to share this communion experience, nor is there a chat area or BBS to talk about your experiences after the ceremony. Finally, although communion is a ritual action, in this case, the interactivity of the event is limited. People may click on a hyperlink and scroll down a webpage to read a pretext message for the ceremony, but the majority of the activity occurs offline with the drinking of the juice and the eating of the bread. Due to these factors, despite the e-communion ceremony at the Church of the Simple Faith being an “online ritual activity”, it is not really a form of online religion.

This case demonstrates that just because the church or organization is stating that they are providing an “e-service”, does not mean that they have opened up the medium to accommodate

²³ Website of Church of the Simple Faith.org, from: <http://www.churchofthesimplefaith.org>.

any type of virtual reality ceremony. In the case of the Church of the Simple Faith, they are providing a ritual pretext and not an environment where a ceremony can take place online. What is occurring in this type of situation is that the organization is providing information to be used in the off-line world. Although there is interactivity involved by clicking on hyperlinks, the Internet medium is still being used to provide information, one-to-many communication, and religion online. Although on the surface, Father John Missing's Creation Spirituality Celebration Circle event and the e-communion from the Church of the Simple Faith both appear to be online rituals, it is only the former that is clearly a form of online religion.

The online religion environment allows people to live their religious beliefs and practices through the Internet medium itself. This requires significantly more than just the ability to click hyperlinks and receive information. Returning to the theoretical work of Clifford Geertz, it is clear that religion functions in a number of ways and has a number of characteristics. His formal definition of religion states, "A religion is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic".²⁴

In order for religion to accomplish what Geertz believes it does, it must be accepted and embraced by those involved to the point that it becomes a template for establishing meaning within their lives.²⁵ To do this, religion must function as a cultural system. It must be such a part of the person's life that they interpret their events and experiences in relation to their religious worldview. In effect, there is no separation in their environment between the religious and the non-religious because their beliefs account for all of their experiences and influence the manner in which they interpret all their life activities.

In the case of online religion, people are living their religion on and through the Internet medium. For those individuals who participate in online religious activity, there is no separation between their offline life and experiences and their online life and experiences, and their religious activities and worldview permeate both environments. For those people who practice online religion, the Internet is not some place 'other' but recognized as a part of their everyday life and they are merely extending their religious meaning and activity into this environment.

²⁴ Geertz 1966, 4.

²⁵ See Geertz 1966, 40.

With this framework in mind, the ideal online religious environment would provide both information (Geertz's "models of" and "models for") and also an area where this information can be lived. This is happening on the WWW as websites try to incorporate both an information zone and interaction zone in a single site or more commonly where popular unofficial websites provide the area for online religion while the official religious website supplies religion online. In cases where institutional religious organizations do not support online religion it may be due to their perception of the Internet as a tool for communicating rather than an extension of our social world. Most likely they do not view the Internet as an environment where people "do" religion. They may believe that it is an acceptable medium for providing information but that any actual religious activity should be undertaken offline. However, this perception may be changing rapidly. As the WWW and Internet communication continue to develop as a social space, it is very probable that organized religious institutions will begin to develop environments for online religion. However, there will still be significant issues concerning the type of participation they will allow for and the types of communication that will occur. Hierarchies and networks are two very different systems and the Internet was really developed for only one of them.

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