

“RITUAL IS BECOMING DIGITALISED”¹

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

ON RITUALS ON THE INTERNET²

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As Ronald Grimes already stated in 2002 “not long ago the terms *ritual* and *media* would have been regarded as labels for separate cultural domains – the one sacred, the other secular”³ and therefore media were not seen as a promising research object in the field of ritual theory. Fortunately this has changed radically. The importance of media and especially of the Internet for religion and religious processes becomes clear in the academic world: “the Media can [...] be seen to be providing the raw material for the intended or unintended construction of religious meanings among people in various contexts...”⁴. The following second issue of *Online. Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* illustrates an example in this field.

The six articles – with the exception of Doris Jakobsh – were originally presented at the international research meeting *Online-Religions and Rituals-Online*, held in October 2004 at the University of Heidelberg, Germany. The conference was organized by members of the research project *Between Online-Religion and Religion Online: Forms of Ritual Transfer on the Internet*, which has been part of the collaborative research centre *Dynamics of Rituals* at Heidelberg University since 2002.

All articles show the importance of analysing rituals on the Internet. Aspects of Ritual Transfer and therefore of Ritual Dynamic could be seen in the changes and modifications of the analysed rituals. Especially the interdependency between the constructions of identity and ritual became obvious. The examples presented here offer a variety of data from different cultural and regional settings. Furthermore they prove the necessity of employing a multi-methodological approach through the engagement of a wide range of academic disciplines.

¹ According to Sjøbi 2000, 122: “*Culture is becoming digitalised.*”.

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³ Grimes 2002, 219.

The contributions to the second volume of *Online. Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* have been divided into three sections. It is clear that the borders of these sections are not fixed but nevertheless they provide a certain focus on the topic “Rituals within the Internet”.

The first section deals with the modification of rituals due to the new possibilities of communication within the Internet. On the basis of two different case studies – one in Iran and the other in India – the shift of communication and consequently of authority is analysed.

In her article *Going on Pilgrimage Online. The Representation of Shia Rituals on the Internet*, Sabine Kalinock gives an overview of the representation of Shia ritual in the Internet and discusses the relation between innovations and traditional discourses. Emphasis is laid on the possibilities that the Internet offers and which are especially important in the Muslim and Iranian context: the mixing of the sexes, exchange with believers in other parts of the world and the free expression of critical ideas. Kalinock thereby concentrates on case studies from Iranian religious websites set up by various Shiite communities, official institutions as well as private persons. These Websites are usually presented in at least three languages: Arab, Persian, and English, and deal with religious regulations and rituals, hagiographies and recent miracle stories that are recorded with modern technology and confirmed by physicians. Pictures, video films and audio records supplement the texts. Via email believers can seek the guidance of a leading clergyman of their choice (*marja at-taqlid*) while various books and online resources provide further advice. In chat rooms men and women discuss, affirm or question the meaning and validity of certain religious rules and rituals.

In her paper *Authority in the Virtual Sanga. Sikhism, Ritual and Identity in the Twenty-First Century*, Doris Jakobsh analyses the change of authority based on her research on Sikhs on the Internet. She stresses the Web as a ‘third place’ of communication among the Sikhs as well as the phenomenon of new authorities online. However, this does not imply the replacement of the traditional seats of authority, the Akal Takht, SGPC, or gurdwara managements, but one can recognize a significant shift away from these traditional sites of authority toward the ‘new authorities’, the intermediaries of cyberspace. Her analysis shows that this aspect of the Sikh experience brings with it the most profound challenges and, most importantly, a need to *bridge* the post-modern individual, i.e. ‘Sikh tradition’ intertwined and legitimated by the meta-narrative, and the proliferation of new authorities who have become intermediaries of Sikhism online by virtue of their expertise within the digital domain.

⁴ Hoover & Lundby 1997, 6.

In the second part, the focus lies on the construction of ritual and the reception of traditional elements. Besides the possibility of communication, the Internet offers a wide range of information about different religions, traditions and rituals. Both papers show that much information is offered in the Internet for the construction of religious identity and therefore also of rituals.

Michael Rudolph's article *Nativism, Ethnic Revival, and the Reappearance of Indigenous Religions in the ROC: The Use of the Internet in the Construction of Taiwanese Identities* deals with rituals presented on Taiwanese Websites in the context of identity construction. Since the mid-nineties, long abandoned and very un-Chinese ritual practices suddenly seemed to become popular again in China's runaway-province Taiwan: in spite of the fact that most of the island's 2% of indigenous population had been Christianized for half a century, intellectual elites of different aboriginal groups now referred to ancestor-gods, tattooing and even headhunting again as essential parts of their own traditional repertoire, often making abundant use of the Internet in order to propagate these convictions to a broader Chinese speaking public. This contribution not only scrutinises the political context that made such a development possible, but also assesses this practice in terms of the identity construction of the specific ethnic groups.

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler stresses the aspect of ritual construction by the individual believers in her paper *Rituals Online. Transferring and Designing Rituals*. In addition to the potential of the Internet to offer interaction and new processes of communication in the context of rituals – the so called “Online-Rituals” –, this medium also offers much information about rituals and instructions how to perform a ritual, in and outside the Internet. This varies from the publication of – at first glance - fixed ritual prescripts to texts on how to design a ritual by him- or herself. These fixed texts are often identified as old traditional scripts, whereas critical analyses show explicit or implicit transfers and receptions of various religious traditions. In the paper, different ritual prescripts presented on Wicca- and Solitaire Homepages, which are often seen as continuation of pre-Christian, matriarchal, Celtic and Germanic cults and mythologies, are analysed and their transfer processes are exemplified. Instances that show the processes of ritual transfer are the choice of the owner-names, the mixture of deities of different religions, the integration of different feasts and festivals etc. The assertion of perpetual continuity from the insider perspective seems contradict those texts which encourage the believers to develop their own individual ritual. Therefore, the elements of newness and invention as well as the phenomenon of Ritual Design in their processes of gaining legitimacy and authority has to be examined.

The third focus lies on the reception of complete rituals in the Internet and could be defined as at the border of the so called online-rituals.

Cheryl Anne Casey deals with *Practicing Faith in Cyberspace: Conceptions and Functions of Religious Rituals on the Internet*. She examines the emerging phenomenon of online religious rituals and their functions for participants in order to illuminate the relationship between changing technologies of communication and our changing conceptions of religion. Her case study considers an online Episcopalian church service within the framework of ritual theory. Keys to the analysis are the particular design chosen for the service (given the multifarious forms which rituals can take in cyberspace) and the relationship between choice of design and the tenets of the particular faith group. The objective of this study is to shed light on the relationship between conceptions of religion, religious experience, and changing media environments by examining online rituals and the meanings and functions these rituals hold for those who access them.

Finally, in *Techno-Ritualization – The Gohonzon Controversy on the Internet*, Mark MacWilliams describes the case of the “Gohonzon”, Nichiren’s sacred *mandala* consisting of the title of the Lotus Sutra that is used for worship in the various Nichiren Buddhist sects. Whereas this mandala is generally considered as extremely sacred and it is demanded that it should be housed in the home altar and only displayed privately for devotional chanting, it can nowadays be found on the Internet as a “prayer Gohonzon” from the American Independent Movement, a Buddhist group unaffiliated with the official authority Sôka Gakkai International (SGI). The Internet site offers a virtual altar with a fully displayed Gohonzon, twinkling lighted candles before it, and the chant, “Namu Myoho Renge Kyo,” flashing syllable by syllable on the screen. MacWilliam underlines the power of the Internet to transform religious practice with the example of the virtual prayer and to challenge real life ecclesiastical organizations: the way the Internet is being used is transforming the way people “do” religion.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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