

## VIRTUAL RITUAL, REAL FAITH

### THE REVIRTUALIZATION OF RELIGIOUS RITUAL IN CYBERSPACE

CHERYL CASEY

#### *Introduction*

A study released in 2004 by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that nearly two thirds of adults, or 64% of America's 128 million Internet users, have gone online for purposes related to religious or spiritual matters.<sup>1</sup> Almost every religion, no matter how small or unusual, has a presence online; cyber-churches and cyber-religions have also emerged.<sup>2</sup> Such survey studies suggest that religion on the Internet is not a phenomenon to be ignored.<sup>3</sup> With the sacred establishing a definitive presence in the online environment, cyberspace has become the next medium to enter the long-standing debate about the relationship between religion and technology.

Religion's relationship with traditional communications technologies has increasingly been attracting scholarship.<sup>4</sup> One of the areas of concern in this body of work is how developments in communications technologies contribute to changes in religious forms and practices. The assumption in such scholarship is that changes in media environments produce shifts in the ways a society perceives, thinks about, and behaves in the world.<sup>5</sup> A similar line of scholarship has developed on religion and the Internet as has been established with traditional media.<sup>6</sup> Peter Horsfield argues that the changing patterns of mediated culture brought about by digital technologies are producing major consequences for faith ideologies, practices, and institutional forms.<sup>7</sup> One of the integral aspects of religions practice that has raised questions in this emerging field of research is that of ritual. Those undertaking studies of religion and the Internet argue that as religion moves into the online environment, it is critical to examine the ways in which the Internet functions as a mediator of religious practice, specifically

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<sup>1</sup> See Pew Internet 2004.

<sup>2</sup> See Dawson 2000.

<sup>3</sup> See also Pew Internet 2000/2001.

<sup>4</sup> See Armfield & Holbert 2003.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see Postman 1982, Ong 1982, Anderson 1991, Eisenstein 1993.

<sup>6</sup> See Armfield & Holbert 2003.

<sup>7</sup> See Horsfield 2003.

religious ritual – for a change in the experience of ritual hold potential change for religious sensibilities.<sup>8</sup>

I place this investigation of religious ritual in cyberspace within the evolving context of contemporary religion and media scholarship. Linderman and Lövheim<sup>9</sup> identify several reasons for choosing religion as an area of computer-mediated communication (CMC) study. First, they see religion as a fundamental dimension of culture, and is therefore interesting when exploring cultural change and development. Since religion is a social phenomenon, it can also be a relatively straightforward task to find groups to study and compare. Finally, they argue that historically, new technologies have often been referred to as “sacred” in their own right – it is therefore appropriate to explore this dimension further in CMC.

More generally, the impact of religion on contemporary society should not be disregarded. The currents of religious energy seem to be gaining strength, although these currents are taking on unaccustomed shapes.<sup>10</sup> Stewart Hoover argues that religion has been falsely excluded from much of contemporary media theory. However, as both religion and media studies are concerned, to some degree, with the social construction of experience, he sees the convergence of this scholarship as holding great promise. The new blending of religion and media studies flows in part “from changing understandings of the world of religion. The need to think more broadly and inclusively about religion has coincided with ongoing redefinition of the fields of mass communication and media studies. That redefinition has moved media research in directions that have the potential for greater purchase on the changed reality of religion.”<sup>11</sup>

### *Research Questions and Theoretical Framework*

A review of the literature indicates that scholars have made note of the possible implications cyberspace may hold for the function of ritual, but the newness of the phenomenon has yet to allow thorough investigation. Of the studies that have so far emerged, some, such as those conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project,<sup>12</sup> provide quantitative data that discern such categories and trends as faith backgrounds of those who

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<sup>8</sup> See Hadden & Cowan 2000, Dawson 2000.

<sup>9</sup> See Linderman and Lövheim 2003.

<sup>10</sup> See Moore 2000.

<sup>11</sup> See Hoover 2002, 28.

<sup>12</sup> See Pew Internet 2000/2001/2004.

use the Internet, the variety and frequency of religion-related uses of the Internet, and the perceived importance of the Internet to users' spiritual lives. Some studies engage in normative debates, noting instances of online ritual and then questioning whether or not it belongs there, whether it is "good" or "bad" for religion.<sup>13</sup> Still others have analyzed specific online ritual events through a particular theoretical framework; for example, O'Leary considers a CompuServe neopagan ritual through the lens of Walter Ong's framework of orality and literacy.<sup>14</sup>

My current research proposes to build on this groundbreaking scholarship in a project that begins to systematically describe the various forms that religious ritual takes in cyberspace, the differences and continuities that exist in translating these ritual forms from a prior media environment, and the faith groups who choose to embrace this media environment for such purposes. Far from draining traditional religious practices from their sacred meanings, online rituals provide meaningful experiences for those seeking new ways of practicing their faith. Therefore, I contend that the questions we need to be asking are not so much whether online ritual is "good" or "bad," but what shifts may be taking place in what is culturally considered viable ritual. Thus, the core question is: how does a consideration of religious rituals in cyberspace contribute to our understanding of the relationship between social conceptions of religion and changing media environments? More specifically, how does a change in the ways that we practice our religion affect our ideas about that ritual practice and its functions? Subsequent questions stemming from this primary inquiry address issues of space, time, co-presence, authority, roles, performance, religious belief, and comparison with version of the ritual enacted in other media environments. By looking at the characteristics of the specific cyberspace – that is, the structure of the environment – in which the ritual is being enacted, questions about the first five categories (space, time, co-presence, authority, roles, and performance) can be explored. How does the design of the cyberspace shape or determine the execution of the religious ritual? What, then, are the characteristics of the religious ritual enacted in cyberspace?

It is important to consider religious belief – and the conceptions of ritual as dictated by these beliefs – when considering the phenomenon of religious ritual.<sup>15</sup> One guiding assumption is that by enacting online ritual, there is a compatibility, or "match," between the belief system and the group's perceptions about the "usability" of cyberspace as a valid ritual

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<sup>13</sup> For example, see Zaleski 1997, Goethals 2003, Groothius 1999.

<sup>14</sup> See O'Leary 1996. For another example, see Schroeder, Heather & Lee 1998 for a description of an avatar wedding as a means to illustrate methodological questions regarding doing research on the Internet.

<sup>15</sup> See Goethals 2003, 268.

space. What role does the belief system of the particular faith group associated with the ritual play in facilitating the use of cyberspace as a ritual space? Finally, what is the nature of the shift to online ritual? Did a comparable ritual form exist prior to its manifestation in cyberspace? If so, how has the traditional religious ritual previously been enacted, and what shifts or transformations can be detected? If the ritual emerged out of the possibilities offered to the faith group by cyberspace itself, what is the nature of this emergence and its relationship to the beliefs of the group?

My study of religious ritual on the Internet thus draws on the frameworks provided by both ritual studies and cyberspace theorists. Ritual studies, as undertaken by ritual theorists, religion scholars, and sociologists, focus on questions regarding space, time, communication, co-presence, and performance. Theorists of cyberspace have been generating similar questions, looking at the ways cyberspace differs from previous media in terms of the speed of communication, the space in which communication occurs, the behavior in the communication environment, the presence of others in the communication context, and the senses employed. Given these parallel sets of questions, a melding of these two frameworks promises a fruitful path of investigation.

Through my analysis of trends in religion and media scholarship, I would suggest the dominant metaphors guiding previous thinking about media and religion in the past are inadequate in the current context of cyberspace, calling for new metaphors, new ways of looking at the intersection of media, religion and culture. In particular, I argue that cyberspace is a uniquely appropriate medium for the enactment of religious ritual, for it returns ritual to its fundamental relationship with the virtual. By offering virtual presence from inside a virtual realm, ritual, as enacted symbol in cyberspace, is all the more effective at pointing beyond itself to the divine or the sacred.

### *Marking Boundaries and Defining Terms*

In the course of this project, however, it is necessary to draw some boundaries around my key terms: cyberspace, religion, and ritual. This project of delimitation can be a daunting task, one that the disciplines devoted to them have themselves yet to sort through. It is not my intention to even try to resolve this contentious terrain and supply cut-and-dried definitions – I leave that project to those who set out to do so. For my own purposes, I draw out précising definitions of these terms, which begin with lexical definitions (or the way in which terms are

used in everyday speech) and sharpen them by stipulating more narrow limits on their use. Précising definitions are therefore subtypes of what Richard Robinson terms “stipulative definitions,” and prove useful when making theoretical arguments in specific cases.<sup>16</sup> All three terms – cyberspace, religion, and ritual – are dynamic cultural components, and indeed, it is part of my purpose to indicate the linkages in these dynamics. But changes in social conceptions can be said to occur within relatively constant general understandings of what we mean by each term. These general frameworks provide the stipulative definitions for bounding the territory in which I explore the more specific conceptual dynamics.

### *Cyberspace – The New Communications Environment*

Defining cyberspace has been a complex task, not least because the medium itself can assume many forms, it is still evolving, and by nature it is constantly changing – any definition of this medium is likely to be fleeting.<sup>17</sup> For the purposes of this study, cyberspace is a particular electronic space associated with computer networks. It is a geographically unlimited, non-physical space independent of time, distance, and location in which transactions between people, between computers, and between people and computers take place.<sup>18</sup> This conceptual space, as Rheingold<sup>19</sup> terms it, is enabled by computer-mediated technology, and includes the Internet, e-mail, Usenet, telnet, and multi-user domains. Of particular interest is Lance Strate’s contention that it is possible to discriminate between sacred and profane versions of cyberspace. Specific cyberplaces, such as the home page for a religious organization, could be considered sacred cyberspace. Another construction of sacred cyberspace would be the non-physical – and therefore potentially spiritual – properties of cyberspace taken as a whole.<sup>20</sup> Jennifer Cobb, in her book “Cybergrace,” comes to similar conclusions, arguing that the world of the spiritual and the world of cyberspace are deeply connected. For Cobb, the medium of computation extends our spiritual experiences in profound ways.<sup>21</sup> These interpretations of cyberspace are integral to understanding the phenomenon of religious ritual online.

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<sup>16</sup> See Robinson 1950, 59-92.

<sup>17</sup> See Costigan 1999.

<sup>18</sup> See Hamelink 2003.

<sup>19</sup> See Gibson et al. 1996, 4.

<sup>20</sup> See Strate 1999.

<sup>21</sup> See Cobb 1998.

*Religion – Defining a Cultural and Symbolic Domain*

The religious landscape is complex; the range of phenomena that present themselves as religious or potentially religious in the spheres of public and media discourse is wide. As historically received categories are replaced by fundamental claims of particular faith perspectives,<sup>22</sup> and as the world of virtual worship expands, former definitions of religion have been stretched thin. The terms “religion” and “religious,” like “cyberspace,” are used so frequently and ordinarily in American popular culture, in particular, that we assume a kind of precise understanding of what they mean. Yet, “many languages do not have closely corresponding terms, and some recent theorists of religion have suggested that religion is a relatively modern concept invented by Western culture rather than just a convenient label for a universal human phenomenon.”<sup>23</sup>

In the interest of drawing practical boundaries around this concept, I turn first to Clifford Geertz. He highlights both the dynamic character and socially binding function of religion, the latter evident in the etymology of the very word itself: from the Latin *religare*, “to tie back.” For Geertz, religion provides a guide for action; when this guide fails to provide adequate assurances that it is comprehensive and comprehensible, new movements arise. Thus, religion is “(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, 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 order of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”<sup>24</sup> He notes that humans have the uncomfortable suspicion that the world has no genuine order at all; the religious response to this suspicion is the formulation, via symbols, of an image of the world that will account for these perceived ambiguities, puzzles, and paradoxes in human experience. Belief in this system of symbols, or religious belief, involves prior acceptance of an authority that transforms everyday experience and defines what is worshipful.

Geertz provides useful groundwork in a scholarly context where recent trends in religious studies no longer see religious aspirations and motivations as largely within specific institutions and organizations.<sup>25</sup> Max Weber describes how we can shift the emphasis away from institutional roles by referring to religion as a “switchman” guiding individuals’ ethical

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<sup>22</sup> See Hoover 1998.

<sup>23</sup> See Kraemer et al. 2001, 6.

<sup>24</sup> See Geertz 2002, 63.

<sup>25</sup> See Hoover & Venturelli 1996.

inclinations in both their contemplative activities and worldly occupations. This conception of religion concentrates on the “mixture of spiritual and rational, ethical and soteriological, individual and collective activities whereby the person in modern societies seeks meaning in life and tries to be of service to others.”<sup>26</sup> Religion then functions as a primary instrument of social cohesiveness – it is preservative, consolation for mortality, and a sign of dignity and meaning in a cosmos with which we have no direct dialogue.<sup>27</sup> It is a system of meaning helping people to make sense of their lives.<sup>28</sup>

While it seems hardly unusual in America, for example, for people to declare their denominational loyalty, identifying themselves as “Episcopalian,” “Catholic,” “Jewish,” “Buddhist,” or other such indicators of religious adherence, there also exists this broader, sociological identification with religion, where faith is described as “human confidence in a conserver of value...manifest[ing] itself almost as directly in politics, science, and other cultural activities as it does in religion.”<sup>29</sup> As Robert Orsi contends, something called religion cannot therefore be separated from other practices of everyday life, or from the material circumstances in which specific instances of religious imagination and behavior arise or to which they respond. He argues that the study of what he calls *lived* religion should focus on how particular people, in particular times and places, live in, with, through, and against all religious idioms available to them in a culture.<sup>30</sup>

### *Religious Ritual – The Practice of Faith*

In all societies, in all ages, humans have engaged in making and performing rituals; ritual seems to be born out of necessity, an impulse to act what we feel. Ritual is not always religion, nor is the converse always true. In *The Magic of Ritual*, Driver locates the making of rituals not in religion, but in the very evolution of the human species: “to study humanity is to study ritual.”<sup>31</sup>

While ritual is not always religion, I consider only ritual behavior that emanates from a religious context and motivation. According to Geertz, religious ritual is consecrated behavior that generates the conviction that religious conceptions are truthful and religious directives are

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<sup>26</sup> See Wuthnow 1998, 5.

<sup>27</sup> See Kelly 1982, 209.

<sup>28</sup> See Cousineau 1998.

<sup>29</sup> See Goethals 1985, 150.

<sup>30</sup> See Orsi 1997.

<sup>31</sup> See Driver 1991, 10.

sound. He suggests that “men attain their faith as they portray it.”<sup>32</sup> Driver adds that ritual is a “planned or improvised performance that effects a transition from everyday life to an alternative framework within which the everyday is transformed.”<sup>33</sup> He suggests that attaining faith, or belief, through portrayal highlights convictions about things that can’t be seen; but, conversely, acting in relation to these convictions, with passion, is the act of believing. Drawing on Ricoeur’s discussion of symbol and metaphor, I suggest ritual is an enacted symbol, and as such, “refers its linguistic element to something else.”<sup>34</sup> Religious rituals are therefore acts of believing because they make references to, and preserve trust in, unseen realities. More specifically, Goethals provides a succinct summary of the fundamental elements of religious ritual. First, it entails entry into specifically designated zones of time and space. Second, religious ritual requires the attentive, dynamic engagement of persons in a participatory event. Thirdly, community emerges from shared attentiveness and participation in these symbolic temporal and spatial zones. Finally, individuals taking part in the religious ritual experience a renewal of spirit.<sup>35</sup>

Ritual, by cloaking the intangible in concrete form via these various elements, makes present the virtual. This work of ritual suggests that cyberspace is a uniquely appropriate medium for the enactment of ritual. The centrality of the virtual as a characteristic of the online environment brings ritual’s fundamental relationship with the virtual into stark relief.

#### *Online Christian Mass: A Case Study of St. John’s Internet Church*

One example of online ritual can be found at St. John’s Internet Church.<sup>36</sup> The Church is an online ministry with a real-world counterpart, a non-denominational Christian Church incorporated in the state of Alabama. The church is not officially affiliated with Episcopal Church USA, although it does maintain ties with the Communion of Evangelical Episcopal Churches. The Episcopalian faith maintains the ancient Catholic sacraments, creeds, and orders of the church, yet rejects the authority of the Pope, instead placing emphasis on the authority of the Bible.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> See Geertz 2002, 76.

<sup>33</sup> See Driver 1991, 238.

<sup>34</sup> See Ricoeur 1976, 54.

<sup>35</sup> See Goethals 2003.

<sup>36</sup> See [www.religionnet.com](http://www.religionnet.com).

<sup>37</sup> See Pittenger 1975.



According to the home page of Internet Church, “The Church maintains many worship traditions, rituals, and liturgical rites that have been established by the Christian Church throughout the centuries...[but] also utilizes some unique approaches to worship.” Episcopalianism historically has maintained both freedom of inquiry and of Biblical criticism; its position is liberal and leaves a place for a “modernist” school of thought alongside a “catholic” and “evangelical” emphasis.<sup>38</sup> This general tendency in Episcopalianism provides a clue as to its willingness to explore “unique approaches to worship,” such as using the Internet to perform a religious ritual.

One of these specifically unique approaches is the invitation to worship at Internet Church 24 hours a day, seven days a week, simply by clicking on a link that will bring the worshipper to a text version of the service. Entry into the distinctively designated zone of time, to use Goethals’s criterion,<sup>39</sup> is determined on individual bases. The periodic setting aside of time that Catherine Bell<sup>40</sup> notes is characteristic of ritual is implied in the weekly updating of the service, but the ability to access the ritual at any time, with any degree of frequency, is no longer determined solely by authoritative figures or institutional dogma.

After clicking the appropriate link, the participant is considered to be “in church.” We see a picture of the inside of the real world church – empty of parishioners – preceding the text of the service for the week, and the wallpaper behind this text displays the seal of the Communion of Evangelical Episcopal Churches. The sacred ritual space otherwise exists on the computer screen, in the space in which the computer is located, and in the conceptual space called cyberspace. Goethals<sup>41</sup> again points us to the importance of entering a specifically designated spatial zone; others similarly argue that ritual actions are generally effective and meaningful only when performed in the appropriate, privileged spatial setting.<sup>42</sup> Does this online service take place in the appropriate, privileged spatial setting? There are several ways of defining what constitutes “sacred space.”<sup>43</sup> A cultural approach to “sacred space” sees the attribution of sacrality as a social construction; the place itself is neutral but can be socially constructed as sacred. A phenomenological approach, bringing attention to the place itself, recognizes the topography and material character of the place as participating in the perceptions made of it. Both of these approaches serve to substantiate the suggestions of

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<sup>38</sup> See Pittenger 1975, 103.

<sup>39</sup> See Goethals 2003.

<sup>40</sup> See Bell 1992.

<sup>41</sup> See Goethals 2003.

<sup>42</sup> For example, see DeCoppet 1992, Gorman 1990.

<sup>43</sup> See Lane 2001.

cyberspace scholars, as mentioned earlier,<sup>44</sup> that cyberspace can indeed be a sacred space. These scholars would contend that the Internet Church service does indeed occur in an appropriate spatial setting – that is, that cyberspace can legitimately be constructed as an appropriate, privileged, sacred space.

Before beginning the service, the participant reads the following instructions: “The words printed in ‘bold’ type are the words spoken by Father Brown, and the words in ‘regular’ type are the words for you, the people, to speak, either aloud, or silently, as you worship at St. John’s Internet Church.” At this point, the participant is free to scroll through the text of the service, which is punctuated by headings that indicate the different parts of the liturgy, and by textual cues for silence, response, or song. The service otherwise follows the traditional format and content. Again, time becomes an issue as the ritual is played out. As Bell has already noted,<sup>45</sup> ritual entails the periodic setting aside of time. The Christian service, when enacted in a real world church, is expected and structured to unfold over a certain, set period of time. In Internet Church, the participant has the ability and power to scroll through the service as quickly or slowly as one desires, skimming through the “boring” parts and stopping to contemplate interesting or touching passages.

Co-presence is also a characteristic of ritual that is altered when religious rituals are enacted in cyberspace. Rappaport<sup>46</sup> understands ritual as lying at the root of social connections, implying a communal aspect to the performance of ritual. He argues that a liturgy is given life by the bodies and breath of human beings – the power of ritual to transform is grounded in principles of communication. Similarly, James Carey, in defining the highest manifestation of communication, contends that “the archetypal case under a ritual view is the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality.”<sup>47</sup> Rituals must be seen and felt to empower both individuals and the collectivity.<sup>48</sup> In Internet Church, unless several people are gathered together in front of the same computer screen, the commonality and fellowship exists only as what Benedict Anderson terms an “imagined community”<sup>49</sup> of fellow believers accessing the ritual on their own time. In her social ethnography of Christian online communities, Campbell found that people joined such online congregations primarily for their ability to build and support relationships.<sup>50</sup> Participants in

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<sup>44</sup> See Strate 1999, Cobb 1998.

<sup>45</sup> See Bell 1992.

<sup>46</sup> See Rappaport 2002.

<sup>47</sup> See Carey 1988, 18.

<sup>48</sup> See Frankiel 2001.

<sup>49</sup> See Anderson 1991.

<sup>50</sup> See Campbell 2003, 224-225.

her study revealed that online religious communities seemed a more effective avenue for fostering a sense of commonality and fellowship.

At the appropriate point in the service, the participant is given the opportunity to either scroll directly through to the end of the service, or click on a link and proceed with an online service of Holy Communion. This type of choice is not offered in the real world unless one leaves the service before its conclusion. However, traditionally, while the Holy Communion is the chief service of Episcopalian worship, the ritual itself does not always occupy a chief place in the Sunday schedule.<sup>51</sup> The link brings the worshipper to a continued textual service, with a description of the offering and consecration of the bread and wine. The text also indicates the moment when the sacrament is to be received.

There are several important questions to consider in this case. First, there is the question of shared participation and the roles participants are expected to play. For Episcopalians, the most fitting way to adore God is through a prescribed form of service with parts assigned to the clergy and to the people.<sup>52</sup> In discussing ritual roles, Gorman, in “The Ideology of Ritual,”<sup>53</sup> identifies three primary roles: the ritual specialist, those on whose behalf the ritual is performed, and those actively involved in the actual performance. The ritual specialist’s presence, he argues, is necessary for the performance of the ritual. In the traditional Christian rite of communion, the presence of the priest is necessary in order for the bread and wine to be transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. At Internet Church, the priest exists in the moment of ritual enactment as words on the computer screen. The implication is a new sharing of authority, with the participant’s reading of the words a necessary step in the consecration.

Holy Communion at Internet Church also directs our attention to symbol, and to ritual as an enacted symbol. The physical objects of bread and wine point beyond themselves to the physical body and blood of Christ; as symbols, the ritual objects provide access to something or make something present.<sup>54</sup> As enacted symbol, the ritual itself does the same. So, recalling Driver’s definition,<sup>55</sup> there is in ritual a basic objective of embodying what is otherwise unseen – the virtual. However, in cyberspace, the divine is made present still as a non-presence, or a virtual presence. This shift is what I refer to when I argue that cyberspace returns ritual to its fundamental relationship with the unseen. Cyberspace “revirtualizes”

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<sup>51</sup> See Pittenger 1975, 101.

<sup>52</sup> See Pittenger 1975, 100.

<sup>53</sup> See Gorman 1990.

<sup>54</sup> Ricoeur 1976, 53-54.

<sup>55</sup> Driver 1991.

religious ritual. As a result, the ritual, as enacted symbol, negates itself so that the sacred or divine to which it points becomes that much clearer. Paul Tillich, in “Dynamics of Faith,” argues: “Every type of faith has the tendency to elevate its concrete symbols to absolute validity. The criterion of the truth of faith, therefore, is that it implies an element of self-negation. That symbol is most adequate which expresses not only the ultimate but its own lack of ultimacy.”<sup>56</sup> Cyberspace lends a negating component to any ritual, thereby rendering it a uniquely appropriate medium for the enactment of ritual. The online Holy Communion provides a particularly salient example of this argument. As a result, we are then forced to rethink the criteria for viable religious ritual.

### *Conclusion*

Certainly, this one isolated example of an online religious ritual leaves more questions than answers. The case of St. John’s Internet Church constitutes one kind of religious ritual in cyberspace, practiced by a particular faith group; the dynamics and experience of any religious ritual will differ according to the design of the cyberspace and the requirements of both the faith group and the ritual itself. However, Internet Church demonstrates the richness of further systematic consideration into the phenomenon of online religious rituals and the ways in which cyberspace shapes how rituals can be performed. Comparisons of online rituals with their real world counterparts may hold interesting insight into how the relationship between changing media environments and conceptions of what constitutes viable, meaningful religious ritual.

One of the areas of concern to scholars of culture and communication is how changes in media environments contribute to changes in the way a society perceives, thinks about, and behaves in the world. In other words, such scholars study the manner in which media change transforms social conceptions and practices. For example, Marshall McLuhan argued that new technologies have social and psychic effects, subsequently shaping our involvement in and experience of the world.<sup>57</sup> Religion is part of this involvement; it is a social artifact arising from a given society that communicates and thinks about the world in particular ways.<sup>58</sup> When a new technology, such as the printing press or the Internet, unleashes massive cultural

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<sup>56</sup> Tillich 1957/2001, 112.

<sup>57</sup> See McLuhan 1994. For further examples, see Ong 1982, Anderson 1991, Eisenstein 1993, Postman 1982, Meyrowitz 1985, and Innis 1995.

<sup>58</sup> See Berger & Luckmann 1966.

change, the challenge to religion is immense.<sup>59</sup> Cultural developments change how God, or the ultimate, is thought of and spoken about.<sup>60</sup>

The implication here is that our religious rituals – or those symbols which point to our concepts and images of the sacred, our sense of the reality of God and our perception of what life with the ultimate is all about will also necessarily change. The introduction of the new technology of cyberspace prompts a shift in the performance of religious ritual that is at least in part characterized by a particular attention to the virtual. The virtual is fundamental to both religious ritual and religion itself. Cyberspace marks a kind of return to basic roots, a revirtualization that prior media environments either obscured, took for granted, or at best tried to imitate. Necessarily lending a negating component to any religious ritual, cyberspace emerges as a uniquely suitable medium for religion and ritual in its inherent virtuality, affecting both religious sensibilities and conceptions of ritual itself. Certainly, at this point, the prominence of religion in cyberspace and all of its diverse forms does suggest as much. The dynamics of this transformation, however, await continued investigation.

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<sup>59</sup> See Eisenstein 1993 for a discussion of the printing press and religion, and Brasher 2001 for a discussion of the Internet and religion.

<sup>60</sup> See Borg & Mackenzie 2000.

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### **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

CHERYL CASEY (\*1976) is a Ph.D. candidate in media ecology at New York University. She is currently writing her dissertation on the topic of the Internet and religious ritual. Her research interests are generally concerned with the intersection of media, religion, and culture, and includes religious documentary film, religion news, and medieval stained glass.

Address: Cheryl Casey, ABD  
Adjunct Instructor  
Department of Culture & Communication  
New York University  
239 Greene Street, 7th fl.  
New York, NY 10003  
212-998-5191

Email: [cac250@nyu.edu](mailto:cac250@nyu.edu)