YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE USE OF THE INTERNET AS TRANSITIONAL SPACE

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In her seminal book *Life on the Screen* (1995), Sherry Turkle described how the Internet could be used as a "space for growth"[1]. Experiences of presenting oneself online, and of interaction with others through computer-mediated communication (CMC), could provide, she argued, a "transitional space" or "moratorium" for experimenting with new ways of understanding reality, self and others. The particular character of online (or what Turkle termed "virtual") interaction could provide "safety" for such experiences since it "operates in a time out of normal time and according to its own rules". Thus, online experiences made possible the development of ways of approaching reality, self and others that where in tune with the post-modern world, since they admitted multiplicity and flexibility, and acknowledged the constructed nature of perceptions and identities in this world.

Turkle's arguments were, as much contemporary writing, heavily influenced by the utopian apprehensions of the impact of the Internet during the mid 1990s, and based on limited empirical studies. The aim of this paper is to discuss these ideas of the Internet as a transitional space in relation to the experiences of young Swedish men and women using the Internet almost a decade later. My purpose is primarily to outline some of the problems and possibilities of approaching the Internet as a transitional space, through the use of empirical data from a recent Swedish case study.[2] I will mainly focus on whether, how and for whom the Internet, or more specifically a popular Swedish web community, can fulfil this function for young people in the process of reflecting on religion and religious identity.

The Transitional Space of Youth

In the literature on young people and youth culture, metaphors such as "transitional space", "moratorium" or "free zone", have been used in order to describe what it means to be young.[3]

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[1] Turkle 1995, 261-262.

[2] I am interested in particular in the character and function of an Internet site per se, as potentially fulfilling functions ascribed by Turkle and others to a transitional space. See Grimes 2002, 222, for a discussion on different ways in which media and ritual can be related.

[3] See Fornäs & Lindberg & Sernhede 1994; Schultze et al. 1991; Bossius 2003.

Through using these metaphors, researchers seek to address two related aspects of the particular conditions shaping the life of youth in contemporary society. The first concerns how the phase of youth itself can be seen as a separated time in between the innocence and dependence upon others that characterize childhood, and the freedom but also responsibilities of adult life. Since the mid 19th century, young people in western societies have to a large extent been separated or isolated in a world of their own, organized by specific institutions such as school, youth organizations, and more recently the youth or teenage market of specific goods and forms of media. The second aspect of young people's specific life conditions concerns their quest for a space of their own, outside the control of adult society or, increasingly, commercial interests.

The German scholar Thomas Ziehe has described how these two aspects shape young people's lives through the concepts "cultural release" and "cultural expropriation"[4]. Late modern society is characterized by a fundamental erosion of traditional patterns of life, norms and identities. On the one hand this situation opens up possibilities for an unprecedented multiplicity and flexibility, which offers greater freedom to break with previous confinements and traditions, explore alternative forms of relations, and cultivate a plurality of lifestyles and identities. On the other hand, the increasing appropriation of experiences through for example the media, impinge upon young people's ability to experience things by themselves and on their own terms. This erosion of traditional mediators of trust and their replacement by what Anthony Giddens terms the institutionalized reflexivity of late modern society[5] fundamentally challenges the purpose of the transitional phase of youth in pre-modern societies. Instead of a phase preparing the individual to enter into a new identity, which is relatively clearly defined, by tradition and the local community, the individual is faced with the task of exploring and constructing the self as part of a lifelong reflexive project.[6] This change may, in addition to new possibilities, also give rise to feelings of insecurity and existential anxiety.[7] Such feelings can lead to attempts to reconstruct ontological security and traditional boundaries among young people. This indicates that the need for symbolic and ritual expression of important transitions in life is as important for young people today as it was in earlier societies, even though the boundaries defining youth and adult life have become more ambiguous and diffuse.

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[4] See Ziehe 1994; Giddens 1991.
[5] See Giddens 1991, 19, 144.
[6] See Giddens 1991, 5, 54.
[7] See Ziehe 1994, 38; Giddens 1991, 198-200.

Rituals of Transition in Modern Times

Young people's strategies of handling the challenge of making meaning of their lives in late modern society have been the topic of studies in youth culture. Several studies have explored how young people use the street, park, shopping mall or, more recently, different media[8] in order to carve out a space of their own that can fulfil some of the functions that are implied in Turkle's use of the word "transitional space". The Swedish scholar Johan Fornäs has, for example, described how rock music can fulfil these kinds of functions for young people.[9] Playing and listening to rock music can be used to claim a space for what he terms "collective autonomy", a space separated from the control of adults in the family and in school, and characterized by a common interest and taste which creates a sense of community among youth. Rock music gives access to alternative values and role models than in the school or in the family, which can also be used to establish differences towards others, and thereby strengthen a sense of identity. Finally, music gives young people opportunities to express their experiences, feelings and identities by themselves, and in different forms than the ones rewarded in school.

Until recently, the place of religion in young people's process of finding possible transitional spaces for handling issues of identity, meaning and belonging has to a great extent been overlooked in the literature on youth culture.[10] A recent study that seeks to address this issue is Lynn Schofield Clark's study of young people's use of popular films and TV series on paranormal phenomena for coming to terms with existential dilemmas and experiences of the transcendent.[11] A Swedish example is Thomas Bossius' study of young people using religious symbols in Black metal and Trance music in the process of identity construction. These studies bring out how young people use religion as mediated by popular culture in order to challenge the boundaries of what is considered 'legitimate' religion in adult society, but also to come to terms with the dilemmas and insecurity of late modernity. In this process, young people can use religion in order to experiment with alternative and more flexible understandings of self and society, as well as to reaffirm boundaries and secure stability and coherence in their lives.[12]

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[8] See Skelton & Valentine 1997; Hall & Jefferson 1976.
[9] See Fornäs 1990, 165.
[10] See Hoover & Clark 1997.
[11] See also Flory & Miller 2000; Beaudoin 1998.
[12] See also Tomasi 1999, for a discussion of these issues concerning the interest for alternative religions among European youths.

In use of the metaphor 'transitional space' or 'moratorium' to explain the situation and practices of young people in modern society, several of the ideas on *rites du passage,* or rituals of transition, described by Victor Turner resound.[13] This concerns primarily his thoughts on how the functions of such rituals in tribal societies can be observed also in modern societies. These kinds of rituals traditionally fulfil the function of transforming and preparing an individual for entering a new position or identity in the social structure. Subsequent work on new forms of transitional spaces and rituals in modern society, for example through the media[14], has primarily picked up on Turner's discussions of "liminality" and "communitas". Liminality as a concept is associated with the margin or liminal phase in a transition ritual, which is set in between the separation, in which the individual through symbolic acts is separated from his or her previous position in society, and the re-aggregation or reincorporation, when the individual takes up a new position.[15] Liminal entities are fundamentally ambiguous, Turner writes, since this condition and the people representing it elude the classifications and positions that make up the social order. They are "betwixt and between the positions assigned and the arrayed law, custom, convention, and ceremonial"[16]. In tribal society, this character comes about through emptying the space or symbolic milieu, as well as the persons going through the ritual, of attributes and hierarchies of the past or coming state. Therefore liminal conditions and people are also characterized by being at the margins, and/or in an inferior state.[17] Turner emphasized how the experience of liminality actualizes the fundamental dialectics of social life, between structure and anti-structure, and the necessary balance between the two. The experiences of being in the transitional space bind those who share it together in a specific, egalitarian/undifferentiated form of community, which he termed "communitas" – a sense of community under girding the social order. Thus, people and spaces characterized by liminality open up possibilities to rethink and revitalize the values and order of a society. Turner himself pointed to how liminality in modern society was expressed for example in Millennium movements or the Hippie culture, and to the similarities between ritual and play.[18]

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[13] See Turner 1977.

[14] See Goethals 2003; Grimes 2002.

[15] See Turner 1977, 94.

[16] Turner 1977, 95.

[17] See Turner 1977, 125.

[18] See Turner 1977, 96-97, 112; Jones 1997, 120. In this discussion, it is important to remember the – at least analytical – distinction between a liminal or transitional state which ritual brings about, and the characteristics of a transitional space in which ritual acts that can make such experiences possible are being performed. In this paper I am mainly concentrating on the second of these aspects. Discussing the possibility of the Internet as transitional space thus focus more on the conditions making experiences of transformation possible that are located outside of the individual, than factors within the individual.

Young People and the Challenge of Constructing Religious Identity

Religion throughout history has played an important part in the transition from childhood to adult life. Religious symbols, narratives and rituals are used to organize and explain rituals of transition such as rites of initiation of young girls and boys into the community of adults. Religion has also been effective in expressing an individual's new position and identity in society, and guiding him or her in how to act within that position. Following Emile Durkheim, religion can fulfil this function since it relates to "sacred things", and prescribes how society should deal with those.[19] Through religious beliefs and practices, society expresses and reconfirms its fundamental values and orders to itself. Even though this role of religion was probably more distinct and unquestioned in pre-modern societies, where religion was less differentiated from local tradition and ways of life, religious beliefs and symbols still influence rituals of transition and initiation of young people in modern society. In Sweden, the ritual of confirmation taking place in the Lutheran Church of Sweden is an example of this. Until a few years ago it was still practiced by almost 50 percent of the Swedish teenagers.[20] Although motifs such as peer pressure, tradition and the receiving of valuable gifts increasingly seem to supersede the explicitly religious motifs, the time of confirmation for many young people still serves as a starting point for reflections on questions of belonging, existential meaning, and identity.

As described earlier, this process is more complicated in late modern society, and so is the role and character of religion. Nancy Ammerman proposes a fruitful approach to the role of religion in identity construction in late modernity.[21] She starts out from how religion in contemporary society is mediated by many competing "narratives", providing "scripts" that guide individuals in situations of social interaction that invoke experiences of references to something transcendent or sacred. An individual's religious identity is formed in the intersections between his or her experiences of facing issues of meaning and existence throughout life, and these religious narratives. In late modern society, each individual is thus faced with the challenge of forging narratives of self, or "autobiographies" that enable them to handle the ambiguous, contested, multiplex, and transitional character of life and of religion in late modernity.[22] In my previous work[23] I have used this approach in order to discuss how young people in contemporary society handle the challenge of constructing 'religious

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[19] See Durkheim 1995, 44.
[20] See Sjöborg 2001.
[21] See Ammerman 2003.
[22] See Giddens 1991, 5.
[23] See Lövheim 2003, 2004a, 2004b.

autobiographies', which represents the individual's continuously constructed understanding of the relation between the self and the sacred or transcendent.[24]

The Internet as Transitional Space

The Internet can be seen as a new kind of space for social interaction, constructed by networks of computers. Today the Internet is also increasingly being used as a religious space, where people can get access to information, and interact with like minded people or those of different convictions in discussions but also through the enactment of rituals. The issue of whether the Internet can be seen as a transitional space, or a 'sacred space', have been discussed by among others Stephen O'Leary, Jan Fernback, Gregor Goethals and Christopher Helland.[25]

O'Leary's discussion of the rituals of "Technopagans" starts out from the question of whether rituals in "virtual" environments can fulfil ritual efficacy. He draws on Smith to present this efficacy as a question of asserting difference, of "performing the ways things ought to be in conscious tension with the way things are" and thereby make these things come about.[26] He suggests that the rituals performed by technopagans bring about this efficacy, not through physical experience, but through the recreation or claiming of a space in which the sacred is manifested through use of the power of language.[27] In this way, technopagans establish a space set apart or differentiated from the world outside and from other online arenas, for the purpose of expressing collective visions of what "things ought to be in conscious tension with the way things are". Rituals on the Internet are, presumably to a larger degree than those taking place through physical presence, characterized by a fundamental awareness of its own quality, as well as the quality of the sacred it invokes, as constructed, arbitrary, and artificial. Nevertheless, O'Leary claims that these rituals may as good as any ritual fulfil the end of "restructuring and reintegrating the minds and emotions" of its participants.[28]

Studies of individual experiences of using the Internet as "a space for growth" for the construction of religious identities are less frequent. Helen Berger & Douglas Ezzy in their study of the meaning of participation in Witchcraft-related online communities among young

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[24] See Lövheim 2004, 42, 65-68
[25] See O'Leary 2004; Fernback 2002; Goethals 2003; Helland 2000.
[26] Smith 1987, 109, quoted in O'Leary 2004, 51.
[27] O'Leary 2004, 54.
[28] O'Leary 2004, 56; see also Fernback 2002.

Australian and American Witches concludes that, in line with Turkle's apprehensions, "participation in the Internet may actually be facilitating identity integration under the conditions of late-modernity, in which relationships are increasingly dispersed geographically and temporally and identity is always in the process of transformation".[29]

Young People, Religion, and the Internet as Transitional Space

These previous studies give several indications of how the Internet can serve as a space for exploring expressions of religious identity, beliefs and practices that help individuals to handle the ambiguous character of existence in late modernity. However, many of these indications are still general and tentative in character. We still need to know more about for example whether some Internet sites might be better suited for such purposes than others, and how different groups of people can take advantage of these possibilities. In the following part of this paper I would like to explore these indications a bit further, in order to bring out some issues that might be relevant to pursue in further research. Here, my primary concern is how the Internet can provide transitional spaces that facilitate the process of constructing what I refer to as religious autobiographies for young people in late modern society.

A first step in studying whether a particular Internet site can serve as a transitional space for young people is to specify what the characteristics and functions of such spaces should be.[30] Following Turner, liminality is represented by people and spaces that represent something different than the positions and conventions of ordinary social structures. This gives them the "ambiguous and indeterminate" character, which actualizes the fundamental dialectics of this structure, and carries the potential to rethink but also revitalize the values and hierarchies founding it. Several of these characteristics echo in Turkle's description of a transitional space online. It operates "on its own rules" which are characterized by ambiguity and fluidity. This character is implicitly ascribed to the online setting as being "outside" or *set apart from "normal" time and rules.* This character is implicitly related to the lack of physical contact, which brings about a *destabilizing of cues that signal social attributes and hierarchies.* Through these characteristics, the online transitional space provides a certain "safety" and can fulfil its function as a "space for growth". O'Leary points to how the

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[29] Berger & Ezzy 2004, 186.

[30] This paper is not the place for a thorough review of the overwhelming amount of studies on rituals in anthropology and religious studies. Therefore I will limit my discussion of such elements to the indications given in the studies referred to above. See also Goethals 2003, 257.

construction of a space set apart from other off- and online spaces is carried out through *the power of language*. However, the existence of this specific space, and thereby of its specific character, depends on each participant's explicit acceptance of these conditions and will keep them going.[31] Therefore, the transitional or sacred space online is also fundamentally *constructed and arbitrary* in character. Nevertheless, these spaces hold the potential of enacting the dialectics between "restructuring and reintegrating" the minds of individuals and of society.

While Turner emphasized the function of liminality to reconstruct a relative stable social order, Turkle and O'Leary focus more on how online arenas characterized by similar characteristics can prepare individuals to approach a social structure which is increasingly ambiguous and arbitrary. Turkle envisions how a transitional space online can help individuals to cope with this situation through breaking with confining social structures and approach reality, self and others as constructed, multiplex and flexible entities. Here, the function of 'restructuring' minds and social positions is emphasized more than the 'reintegrating' function. Her discussion of how the Internet cannot become an alternative life, but rather should be "discarded after reaching greater freedom", to some extent addresses this function. O'Leary also emphasizes the function to envision another kind of order, but he leaves the question open whether disembodied actors and relationships online will reaffirm the social hierarchies of the world offline or depart from them.

Starting from these characteristics of transitional online spaces summarized above, we can formulate some questions for studying to what extent they apply to a particular Internet site. First of all, we need to know more about how the site is constructed as a space set apart from the conditions of 'normal' or everyday, offline life of users. What features of the particular site do fulfil this function? We also need to ask what their implications are regarding whether they facilitate or confine key elements of a transitional space identified by previous studies. How do they affect the suspension of cues signalizing social attributes and hierarchies in an offline context? How do they affect the possibility to construct a consensus of rules and values among participants through the "power of language", which O'Leary sees as crucial to define and shape a "sacred" space?

Secondly, we need to look deeper into the implications of the particular character of an online context. Here, we need to study how users of the site experience the ambiguity that is formed by the presumed destabilizing of the 'normal' social structure. As O' Leary points out,

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[31] See Correll 1995.

ambiguity gives opportunities for flexibility but also awareness of the constructed, arbitrary, and artificial character of the space and the meanings produced therein. Previous research shows that young people experience and respond to this kind of ambiguity in different ways. Therefore we need to ask whether the experience of a particular Internet site produces a sense of safety that enhances reflection and perhaps reconstruction of – in this case – understandings of self, other people's choice of religion, and the transcendent reality. Or does it rather feed insecurity?

Internet as Transitional Space: Experiences from a Swedish Case Study

In the following discussion I will use the example of a particular online arena, a Swedish web community that I call simply "the Site"[32]. This web community is not oriented towards religion *per se,* but supplies discussion groups and chat rooms on a wide variety of topics. During the time of the study, it was visited by a large number[33] of young people from a variety of backgrounds. The empirical material that will be used in the following discussion where collected through online observations of eight discussion groups on religion, four focusing on Christian faith, and four focusing new or alternative forms of religion such as Wicca, Shamanism and Magic.[34] Furthermore 15 young men and women in the age of 18-20 where interviewed about their use of the web community during one year. These young people came from a variety of religious backgrounds. Eight of them where more or less active in different Christian denominations, while the other half oriented themselves toward the alternative religions mentioned above. For several of the informants, the year when the study took place was the year when they were about to leave high school, and thereby ending 12 years of compulsory school in Sweden. The experience of leaving high school initiates a process of entering adult life, characterized by responsibilities and freedoms such as taking responsibility for one's own decisions, economically supporting oneself, leaving home, but also finding one's own identity and purpose of life.[35] Thus, for the informants, the time of the study intersected with a time in their lives that in several ways was characterized by

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[32] In order to protect the identities of my informants, I do not reveal the name or URL of this site.
[33] In the year 2000 when the study was carried out, the number of member accounts where approximately 800,000.
[34] See Lövheim 2004.
[35] Ny Tid – Nya Tankar 1998.

experiences and questions about transition from one stage in the process of constructing identities to another stage.

A Space Set Apart from 'Normal' Life

Starting with the first of the questions outlined above: in what ways the Site was constructed as a space set apart from the informants' everyday, offline situation, especially concerning discussions on religious and existential issues? Here, I will focus on two aspects: its character as a separate place for young people, and its function of providing a separate time for pursuing one's own agenda. Like other web communities, the Site required that users became members in order to fully take advantage of its services. This included access to discussion groups, instant messages, and a personal web page where participants could present themselves in different ways. Members logged in through using a name of their personal choice, and a password. The act of logging on to the Site thus signalled that users were entering a space separated from other spaces offline as well as on the Internet, as pointed out by O'Leary. This experience was also supported by the presentation, the layout, and the history of the web community.[36] It was started by a young Swedish man as a "hobby", and when the Site grew he managed it primarily through the help of a few friends. The Site was presented as "a fun place to meet other people online", and the layout was fairly simple, not very elaborated or "flashy". Discussions at the Site were not moderated, and the web master described himself as fairly "broadminded" as to what opinions that could be voiced, with the exception of outright commercial postings, and discriminating or agitating comments against particular groups of people. All of these features contributed to present an image of the Site as a cool, laid back place to hang out, made by young people for young people, away from the eyes and structures of the adult world.[37] When asked about why they became members, several of the informants also talked about how "every young person in town uses it" or "a friend/some friends of mine used it".

As a web community, the Site provided access to this meeting place at all hours. The Site as providing a time set apart from everyday duties in young people's lives was evident due to the rising number of log-ins during lunch time and in the evening and night. Many of my

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[36] This information was obtained through e-mail contacts with the web masters.
[37] This character of a subculture for young people is further enhanced by the name, which according to the webmaster was chosen because it "wasn't associated with anything else in particular", and has "a sort of punky-reference".

informants described how they used the Site primarily during break time in school, or late in the evenings when the family computer was free. This use of the Site, in order to get a break from the agenda of school or to "have some fun" after school, was clear also in how several of them primarily associated their use of the Site to their time in high school. Leaving high school for many of them also meant leaving or cut down on their use of the Site.

In these ways, the Site could present a place set apart for discussions of religious and existential issues on terms set by young people rather than by teachers, parents or religious leaders. The informants described how it gave access to other kinds of topics than in the school context, and a wider range of opinions than those voiced in the religious youth groups they attended in their offline community. Furthermore, the Site provided access to discussions on times that suited young people. The function of providing a place and time set apart for these kinds of discussions on religion was, however, also complicated by the particular conditions for interaction of the Site. Its character as a place set apart for young people was – during the latter part of the study – threatened by the growing popularity of the Site.[38] When its size had outgrown the time and computer facilities of the original founders, they established contact with a commercial IT company, and announced the launch of a new version of the Site. Several members reacted against this as a threat against the original atmosphere of the Site. As the new version was more elaborated and thus more difficult to access, primarily for those connecting to the Internet through a modem, members started to complain or leave the Site.

The examples outlined above show some ways in which technical aspects such as the interface of an Internet site may facilitate but also complicate its possibility to become a space set apart in time and place for young people to explore the role of religion in their life on their own terms. The final example also highlights that apart from online conditions we need to take into consideration conditions in the offline world when discussing whether the Internet can fulfil this feature of a transitional space. As the example of the Site shows, access to this space required access to a computer and preferably a fast Internet connection which was still quite expensive for an average Swedish family at the time of the study. Furthermore, this access often had to be negotiated with peers wanting to use the school computers, or with family members wanting to use the family computer.

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[38] In February 2000 the number of unique users was 200,000. In October of the same year the number of registered members was 780,000.

A Space for Destabilizing Social Positions

The second crucial feature of a transitional space described in previous studies is its ability to suspend or destabilize cues signalling social attributes and hierarchies that structure the user's position in offline social structures. When becoming a member of the Site, users were asked to choose a nickname and submit information about their age, gender, and place of living. This information could then be presented in a kind of label or "pick up line" accompanying the name, as well as on the member's personal web page. On this page members could also display images, interests, as well as associations at the Site such as cyber friends and most frequented discussion groups. This information, along with a person's chosen name, thus made up the cues to a member's identity on the Site. The fact that the information was (primarily) given in text rather than through vision, sound or touch, gave members opportunities to circumscribe, change or altogether discard cues of identity used in everyday, offline life. All the informants brought up this possibility when describing their use of the Site. They expected to, through the "anonymous" character of interactions, do things they felt restricted from doing in their everyday lives; for example to be more outspoken, challenge stereotypes, or discuss delicate issues. Thus, their intentions were to try out ways of presenting religious convictions and identities at the Site that in some way differed from their experiences of approaching these issues offline.

An analysis of the patterns of social interaction in the discussion groups did, however, show that rather than allowing a flexibility in the kind of approaches to and relations between religious groups that the informants experienced in the offline context, the textual cues in nicknames, postings, and on personal web pages lead to the use of stereotypes, or polarizations between users of different religious convictions. This primarily happened between users signalling affiliation to a Christian tradition and those who presented themselves as atheists, Satanists or Wiccans. The experience of many of these informants was aptly summarized in a comment made by one of the young Christian girls:

> … on the Site it's often like people have a certain image of the church and they sort of stick to it, and also of the one who is a Christian … it's like, you know, people don't know how things are really and they cannot get to know things better through the Site either.

This ambiguity of textual cues is highlighted by the experience of one of the most active atheists, who was approached as a Christian since he on his web page listed several discussion groups on Christianity and some ironic statements about Christian beliefs! Once positioned as a "naïve and stupid Christian", those users had great difficulties changing this image, and

found themselves trapped in endless, polarized debates. Several of them referred these problems to the way the discussion group was arranged at the Site. Postings allowing no more than 500 signs, lack of moderation, and the steady inflow of new members picking up on the same topics did not provide the means they needed to change the situation.

For users who oriented themselves towards other religious traditions than Christianity, the Site seemed to, in line with Berger and Ezzy's findings described earlier, provide a space where traditional offline, religious authorities could be challenged and new alternatives explored. At the Site Christianity, for several centuries the dominant mediator of religious beliefs and practices in Sweden rather came to hold an inferior position to approaches to religion based on science, or witchcraft, shamanism and Satanism. However, users interested in Wicca, magic and Satanism also had experiences of an unexpected polarization between users. In this case, interactions as mediated through discussion groups seemed to lead to the formation of new divisions between participants, based on cues of 'experience' or 'serious' versus 'unserious' intentions. Such cues consisted of for example references to books, rituals, and years of practice. However, since this kind of experience can be difficult to 'prove' through written text, the criteria of online conduct, preferably treatment of new users was also used to separate more and less 'experienced' and 'serious' users. As explained by the informant "Vera", someone who is "serious" about his or her religion " … permit everybody else to think whatever they like and then you discuss things, not like … scold someone, you know".

Another way of destabilizing social position can be to use several different nicknames in interactions. However, as shown by this response to one of the informants who tried out this strategy, a position as 'serious' and thereby trustworthy in the interactions seem to require a certain stability rather than instability of personal identity: " … thinking of the fact that you don't use one identity but several, how can you be asking something of other people?"

These examples indicate that the ambiguity created by the use of solely textual cues in online interactions not only give users a possibility to destabilize social positions, but may also reaffirm or reconstruct religious stereotypes, divisions and hierarchies in the offline context. The experiences of primarily those who through criticism or scolding were assigned inferior positions in the interactions, like the "stupid" Christians or the "inexperienced" magicians, showed that trying to reverse such positions could be even harder in this supposedly "anonymous" space than in face-to-face interactions.[39] Users who dominated the

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[39] Studies by Kendall 1999, Burkhalter 1999, and Slevin 2000 also suggest that online interactions can reconstruct as well as reaffirm social hierarchies of gender, race and class in the offline world.

interactions were those who were frequently present in the discussion groups, but also were skilful in dismissing other people's arguments and assessing their own opinions through short, written contributions. These users were, predominantly, young men. This illustrates how the potential to circumscribe social positions and hierarchies online also has to be related to the resources and restrictions of different users. Such individual factors might be a user's religious conviction, gender, previous experiences of written discussions, and of using the medium.

A Space for Constructing Religious Autobiographies

The examples above show that in some respects, the Site did improve conditions for approaching religion in ways that served the individual's needs and intentions, as compared to those in the offline context. This was primarily the experience of young people interested in religious traditions that by mainstream society were seen as marginal and obscure. At the Site and other places like it, Wiccans, Satanists or magicians could claim a religious identity of equal significance and legitimacy as Christians. However, discussions at the Site could also lead to critique of convictions and intentions and new dilemmas that a person might not have been exposed to as a solitary practitioner in the offline context. Similar experiences of possibilities and problems were expressed by the Christian informants who at the Site found discussions that offered a flexibility and plurality on crucial issues that was larger than in the local congregation, but at the same time faced new difficulties in trying to "restructure" other people's preconceived ideas about Christian lifestyle and beliefs.

Almost all the informants of the study left the Site within the year that I followed them. This was in part due to changes in their offline lives, but primarily to the fact that the Site could not, in the long time, provide the kind of conditions that they expected and needed in the process of forming religious identities that helped them to deal with the challenges of life. The polarized and fragmented discussions, and difficulties of expressing themselves due to limitations of time and space, made them feel trapped in ascribed identities that they did not see as congruent with their religious autobiographies. For these young people, experiences of interaction at the Site did challenge and 'restructure' their understandings of religion and religious identities, but not in ways that also enabled them to try out new approaches to these issues.

Four of the informants did, however, seem able to use the Site in accordance with expectations outlined in previous research. These informants differed in several ways; two were male and two female, one was a Christian, one a pagan, one an atheist and one a "seeker". However, they all found ways to handle many of the problems experienced by the other users. Their ability to find these strategies was based on some competences that they possessed more than the other informants. All of them had access to computers of their own, and thereby were able to actively participate in the discussion groups. They were skilful in expressing their beliefs and convictions through written contributions. Furthermore, these users had an approach to religion that fitted the character of the discussions, characterized by reason, distance, critique, wit, and irony. These characteristics seem to give them a sense of trust in their ability to handle the conditions of online interactions. Thereby they were also able to accept and use these interactions to develop further understandings of their own and other people's religious identities. This is exemplified in the reflections of the informants "Stirner" and "Maria" from their time at the Site:

> I've also gained more respect for … the more secular part of Christianity. Svirk and people like him. For people who have reflected on this and, well, for some reason accept god's existence … but who accept other people's opinion about this and do not try to adjust reality in order to fit the Bible. I respect these people so much more, and so I don't look upon Christians as a homogeneous group in the same way as before.

> … I've become more humble, perhaps, realized that I really don't know everything and … there are like, no evidences either of God's existence or the opposite. So I think that I've come to realize that I don't know as much as I thought I did before.

These experiences reflect some of the attitudes that Turkle described as "in tune with" the "postmodern world", such as acceptance of multiplicity, flexibility, and transience of beliefs and identities.

Conclusion

In the early days of Internet research anticipations where expressed concerning the online environment as potentially a modern kind of 'transitional space'. In this paper I have tried to tease out some key features and functions of such spaces, as described in some of these studies, and to discuss whether they can be applied to the popular Swedish web community "the Site". The features that I chose to focus on were the characteristics of a site as *set apart from conditions that structure 'normal' life* in terms of time, space, and rules of and positions

in social interaction, and its fundamental *ambiguity* and thereby potential to *allow more flexibility or destabilization of social positions.* In terms of the function of these conditions I focused on how these conditions were experienced by young people, primarily whether they produced a sense of 'safety' or control and trust, which, I turn, would help them in the process of reflecting on and reconstructing their understandings of religion and religious identities, primarily in terms of openness to multiplicity and flexibility.

The discussion shows that such characteristics to some extent can be found at the Site. It is constructed as a space set apart for and suited to the interests and needs of young people. As described above, this character is however quite fragile and dependent on certain conditions on the part of the users. This finding corresponds to O'Leary's discussion of the fundamentally arbitrary character of an online 'sacred space', with reference to how language constructs and keeps this kind of space going. While O'Leary, like many early studies of online transitional spaces, focused on relatively small, closed groups of Internet users (like technopagans), these kinds of findings bring out the importance of studying also larger, more heterogeneous Internet sites. This is not least important when considering the expansion of the Internet since the mid 1990s, in number of users as well as of interests represented. Findings from online spaces such as the Site point to how differences in experiences, needs and intentions of individuals partaking in a transitional space can become a resource for flexibility and new forms of "communitas", but also shatter the possibility of the space to fulfil this potential. Indications of how the 'set apart' character of the Site becomes threatened by its growth, also shows how the influence of corporate interests looking for lucrative markets among young Internet users can complicate young people's possibilities to find and maintain such spaces.

My example also points to the need to study how the set apart character of an online space is intrinsically linked to and dependent upon resources in 'normal' or offline life. For young people to claim a transitional space, such basic things as access to computers are needed. Even in a wealthy country like Sweden, young people may have a harder time than adults getting access to the resources needed to claim such a space, and negotiating the use of these with family, school and peers.

The examples above also show that interactions at the site did challenge the young informants' understandings of 'normal' cues of social positions and religious authority in society. Thus, experiences of discussing religion at the Site proved to be an ambiguous experience for the young people in the study. However, this ambiguity was of a more complicated character than envisioned in previous research. The experiences of the

informants show how it rather leads to a reaffirmation than a reconstruction of stereotypes about religious identities, and to a construction of boundaries in order to separate authentic or "serious" religious identities from "fake" versions. These findings show that we need a more critical and nuanced discussion of the anticipation that online interaction, due to its differences in cues for presenting and interpreting identity, can become a space for envisioning and perhaps enacting things in ways that challenge conventional understandings of religious beliefs, practices and identities. This 'ambiguous ambiguity' also points to the need to bring some other variables into the discussion. In Turkle's description of the online transitional space, the sense of 'safety' is also described as adding to its function as a "space for growth". The examples above show that ambiguity and flexibility can be a basis for ascribing a sense of safety or trust to an Internet site, but it can also create insecurity, which might lead to attempts to reaffirm more stable, dichotomised understandings of religious identities.[40]

This finding corresponds with previous studies of young people in late modern society, which show that they, on the one hand, seek ways to establish an identity independent of religious institutions and the rules and hierarchies associated with such. On the other hand, young people seek ways to establish coherence and ontological trust in order to handle the complexity and ambiguity they encounter in late modern society, not least in facing different suppliers of religious beliefs and practices. These particular dilemmas of the 'transitional phase' of youth might complicate the construction of 'transitional spaces' for youth on the Internet. Growing up in a society where institutions and positions representing the "structure-part" of Victor Turner's societal dialectics are increasingly ambiguous and diffuse – people's their experience of ambiguity online might lead to a greater need for trust and coherence. These findings echo something, which is noted for example in the studies of O'Leary, Berger and Ezzy. It seems as though an Internet site, in order to function as a transitional space for young people, must include possibilities to 'restructure' identities and ideas encountered in life outside the Internet, but also to 'reintegrate' the complexities and ambiguities of this life, in a structure of meaning and relevance to the individual. Furthermore, these findings indicate that the experience of *trust* can be a crucial issue to pursue further in discussions of when and how young people can be able to use the transitional space provided by an Internet site as a space for growth. The examples of the four informants who managed to use the Site in this way show clearly that ambiguity and flexibility alone are not enough to generate this trust. As

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[40] See also Linderman & Lövheim 2003.

exemplified above, conditions such as skills in using computers, as well as in expressing oneself through written text, gender conventions, and questions of access to computers also seem to be needed.

This paper has but begun to raise questions about when, how and for whom the Internet can provide transitional spaces that enable individuals and groups in late modern society to make sense of their life conditions. We clearly need more studies in order to develop our understanding of this potential of the Internet further. In order to make such studies, we need to study different kinds of Internet sites, and we also need to specify further what aspects of the online context that can contribute to establish an Internet site as a transitional space.[41] Also, this paper shows that in order to make sense of how the Internet can be used as a transitional space, we need to approach these experiences not only as set apart from 'normal' time and rules, but as integrated in the everyday situation of different groups of people. Age, gender, economical situation, and religious belonging are some factors that might affect different individuals' needs and resources for using the Internet as a "space for growth".

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[41] In these discussions, use of the analytical concept "repertoire of possibilities", introduced by Slevin (2000, 81f) might be useful. For a further discussion of this possibility, see Lövheim 2004, 60, 77-82.

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