

RELIGION ONLINE

Religious Information and Practice in Cyberspace: Christianity in the Web

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The 1996 study by the Barna Research in California concluded that "church organizations quickly establish their presence in cyberspace or they would lose touch with many of their parishioners and risk losing the ability to advise them in an era of rapid technological growth." When the World Wide Web was still relatively new and uncharted, organized religion was urged to establish its presence on the electronic frontier before it was too late.

In 1999, at the second BISCOP on modern communication technologies, the same call resounded: that Asian Churches should engage in Internet communication or else... One resource person made a lasting impression when he asked this question to the bishops: If the Church established herself firmly in the Gutenberg technology, can it miss the digital revolution that is sweeping our region?

Over the years, Christianity and Christian religious expression have multiplied on the World Wide Web. Christopher Helland reported that by August 2002, the categories of websites representing Christian beliefs and practices had increased by over 300 percent from Yahoo's 1999 figures, and "showed no signs of abating." In a chapter in "Religion Online, Finding Faith on the Internet," Helland also reported that 78 percent of the religious websites registered in the web search environment called "Open Directory Project" (ODP) are labeled "Christian." Within this fraction, Roman Catholicism is found to be the largest single denomination represented in cyberspace.

We are going to look at some examples later. We will tour the Internet and see some Catholic materials uploaded there. But before that, let us first acquaint ourselves with the concepts "religion online" and "online religion." These concepts are the first fruits of scholarly work which sought to systematize research and study of religion on the Internet.

In a chapter of the 2005 release "Religion Online, Finding Faith in the Internet" Glen Young expounded on these two categories of religious expression in cyberspace. Basing on previous research, Young cited the distinction between (1) "the provision of information about religion versus the opportunity for participation in religious activity; and (2) primary reference offline (towards) preexisting religious traditions versus primary reference to religious activities taking place online."

Hadden and Cowan describe "religion online" as that which "provides the interested web traveler with *information about* religion: doctrine, polity, organization and belief; service and opportunities for service; religious books and articles as well as other paraphernalia related to one's religious tradition or quest." They contrast this with "online religion" which they describe as that which "invites the visitor to *participate in* the religious dimension of life via the Web; liturgy, prayer, ritual, meditation, and homiletics come together and functions with the electronic space itself acting as church, temple, synagogue, mosque and grove" (Hadden and Cowan 2000; Helland 2000). Young said

"religion on the Internet includes a multiplicity of activities that fall at various places along the spectrum (extending) between *information* and *participation*." The "first axis that extends between "religion online" and "online religion" concerns provision of information and participation in activity." (cf. Dawson and Cowan, 2005 p. 94)

The Catholic portal "Catholic Online" at www.catholic.org is filled with information and all kinds of services but not necessarily online prayer. Net visitors are still directed to Churches and the sacraments. Catholic Exchange at www.catholicexchange.org similarly offers news and information but it also has a link to a virtual adoration chapel at www.savior.org

Let us take a look at the new video blog of the Filipino bishops hosted by youtube.com:

Case 1: Video Blog of Filipino Bishops

URL:

<http://www.youtube.com/profile?user=cbcmedia>



The video blog of the Media Office of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) started on April 2, 2007. As of May 3, 2007, 104 individuals are active subscribers of the blog, some of them are Filipinos working overseas. In the "Comments" section of the website, one who is working in the Middle East said he appreciates the video programs especially because he and his companions miss the Lenten activities in their own parishes and hometowns. (Most of the materials uploaded at that time were about the rituals and meaning of Lent.) There is an appeal from a priest of a remote parish in southern Luzon for religious audio-visual material. An SVD seminarian also posted an encouragement directed to CBCP to keep on uploading videos. This seminarian happens to maintain his own blog for the Divine Word Missionaries in the Philippines (<http://www.youtube.com/profile?user=fielsvd>), which has been up in cyberspace, in the same Internet facility, for nine months ahead of CBCP.

The CBCP Media Office decided to go into video blogging, "in answer to the call of the Holy Father 'to make the Internet as a new forum for proclaiming the Gospel,'" a section in the homepage reads. "The launching was timed for the Holy Week, it being the most appropriate time to issue short catechesis on the liturgical significance of the celebrations that have been most misunderstood," said Msgr. Pedro Quitorio III, spokesperson of the CBCP and director of its Media Office.

Quitorio said the video blogs are "short, fast and easy" and are attuned to the psyche of today's youth." The YouTube account is actually conceived as a service to the young faithful who, according to the priest, "are more inclined to listen to the latest technology rather than the age-old sermon." "It seemed a good way to reach our target audience," Quitorio added.

The CBCP Media Office has an Internet facility that provides broadband connectivity and filtered of pornography through satellite systems, VSAT and Radio IP systems, to over 100 Catholic schools and dioceses nationwide.

The Office has a team of designers, and hosts websites including the official website of CBCP itself located at <http://www.cbcponline.net/> where seven of the 80 Filipino bishops in the country maintain their own individual weblogs. The Office also gives training to church workers on IT (e.g. Systems Administration, Educational Technology, Web Design and Multimedia applications for Evangelization). It also produces video documentaries using the latest in software and hardware technology. The monthly Impact Magazine and the fortnightly CBCP Monitor are all under the Media Office's direction including the local Catholic news agency, CBCPNews Service.

Case 2: The Official Website of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines

URL: <http://www.cbcponline.net>



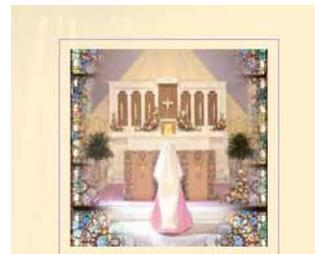
The bishop's weblog is a clear example of "religion online" – using the Internet solely for information dissemination and clearly a one-way flow of communication between communicator and net visitor. The same is true for the bishops' official website which is teeming with all sorts of information from the organizational structure of the bishops' conferences, to news, pastoral statements, documents and homilies. There is a section called "The Word Today" which shows a calendar with dates linked to the relevant Scripture reading for the day. As of May 3, 2007, this section was updated up to the month of October 2006.

The website also highlights a spot dedicated to the current president of the bishops' conference as well as the Bishops' blog featuring seven of the 80 Philippine bishops. The blogs themselves are textual by nature and an ideal resource for students doing research as well as for the general laity aiming at a deeper understanding of the Catholic faith. However, there is no section dealing with Catholic rituals or prayers. It is also noteworthy to mention the absence of any link to external websites related to the Catholic Church, not even the Holy See's website at www.vatican.va nor the FABC website at www.fabc.org. There is, however, a free email service and links to the different dioceses in the country and to the more than 30 commissions and offices of the bishops' conference.

Now let us look at other websites that are oriented towards "religion online" but offer "online religion" services at the same time:

Case 3: The Holy Spirit Adoration Sisters

URL: <http://www.adorationsisters.org/index.html>



The "pink sisters" or the adoration sisters of the Divine Word congregation are never seen in the public but their name resounds well in the Philippines. In their famous chapels,

Cory Aquino decided to run for president in 1986 and so did incumbent Gloria Macapagal Arroyo in 2004. The humble sisters are now present in the worldwide web through their own website maintained from the sisters' house in Philadelphia, USA. (Source: http://beta.inquirer.net/nation/index.php?index=1&story_id=1583)

The site is filled with information regarding the congregation, their history, mission, their way of life as well as a directory of their houses in nine different countries worldwide. Without a doubt, the site was envisioned to be a vocation promotion tool. Thus, it has a special section titled "why join the adoration sisters?" explaining the benefits of living a contemplative life. The "virtual tour" section opens up to a slide presentation showing beautiful photos of the sisters' houses and their daily activities in the convent. There is also a section on vocation discernment titled "am I being called?" featuring an article written by Fr Anthony Bannon.

What makes this site unique is a section where net visitors can send their prayer requests. Pink sister convents, at least in the Philippines, are famous for accepting prayer requests. An online version of this religious practice was apparently conceived and this makes for a two-way religious communication in cyberspace. With this kind of service, there is reciprocity in information exchange between communicator and net visitor. This site of the Pink Sisters while clearly exemplifying a "religion online" simultaneously represents an instance of "online religion."

Case 4: The Jesuits in Singapore

URL: <http://www.jesuit.org.sg/>



The website of the Jesuits in Singapore is another example of "religion online" but at the same time offering "online religion" services. The site is impressively equipped with prayer guides which any individual can follow at any time of the day. These prayer guides include instructions like when to "close your eyes" as well as what to think about e.g. when the net visitor is asked to "Review the day." The rituals and practice of the so-called "Ignatian spirituality," which for centuries are conducted in a physical location or in recollections or retreats, are made available with a click of the mouse or stroke of the keyboard. The site itself directs net visitors to a physical Church to worship but the online prayer guides offer the convenience of anytime anywhere (as long as there is a computer) prayer as well. Like in the previous example, the Jesuits in Singapore also accept prayer petitions from net visitors thereby promoting a two-way communication with net visitors beyond the simple feedback gathering mechanism that is common to sites like these.

Case 5: The Society of Jesus in the Philippines

URL: <http://jesuits.ph/>



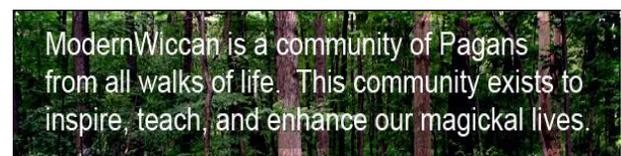
The website of the Society of Jesus in the Philippines (<http://jesuits.ph/>) is yet again an example of "religion online" with some hints of "online religion." However, unlike in the previous case where the provision for online prayer is included right within the site itself, net visitors are directed to related Jesuit sites outside the Philippines e.g. to the Sacred Space site at <http://www.sacredspace.ie/> by first clicking either the "Ministry" or "Spirituality" option in the main menu and into the Center for Ignatian Spirituality blogspot at <http://cisphil.blogspot.com/>. There, under the section "Your daily spiritual drop," is a link to "Daily Prayer Online" on Sacred Space. "We invite you to make a 'Sacred Space' in your day, and spend ten minutes, praying here and now, as you sit at your computer, with the help of on-screen guidance and scripture chosen specially every day," reads its homepage. Upon entering and choosing a particular date, the net visitor can then start prayer and reflection.

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Not all websites within the "Catholic" classification, however, represent the official voice of Roman Catholicism. Along side online representations of official Church organizations, bishops' conferences, dioceses and parishes, there are websites which according to Helland present Catholicism from a popular perspective, some pose questions and openly dispute the teachings and doctrine of the centuries-old religion. The number of such websites increases further, says Helland, as one tries to explore websites outside the "Catholic" or "Christian" classification, for instance, those dealing with witchcraft or with "New Age," etc. Here are some examples:

Case 6: The Modern Wiccan

URL: <http://www.modernwiccan.com>



ModernWiccan.com was first launched by Blake Schreurs in January of 2001 with the goal of creating an on-line community of pagans. The site was and still remains to this day focused on providing information, material resources for the practice of witchcraft and paganism. Many of the articles featured in the "Articles & Essays" section (http://www.modernwiccan.com/article_tbl.php) are anti-Christian and anti-religion in general. Another wiccan site is The Celtic Connection (<http://www.wicca.com/>) site which links to a practitioner's site that claims to be Bible-oriented in her wiccan (pagan or witchcraft) practice (<http://www.kardia2000.com/>). Like other wiccan, pagan or witchcraft sites, The Celtic Connection, offers potions, spells, calendars and rituals as well as external links to related websites.

Case 7: New Age Religion

URL: <http://www.modernwiccan.com>



There are many websites devoted to the so-called "New Age Religion" which contain references to Christianity in their literature. "The God Kind" website (<http://godkind.org/index.html>), for example, features articles seeking to debunk many Christian concepts from salvation to Christmas using Scripture itself. The New Age Pride website (<http://www.newagepride.org/>) does not openly challenge Christian or Catholic beliefs but teaches followers and possible converts concepts that could potentially put those beliefs in serious question. Another site that is interesting and which offers a wealth of information to New Age followers is "New Age Information" (<http://www.newageinfo.com/>) There, visitors can find articles upon articles on a wide range of subjects from divinity, astrology, health concerns and others, all expectedly veering away from Christian beliefs. It has an open directory of web resources on new age (<http://www.newagewebdirectory.com/>) listing "products, services and information for the body, mind and soul."

Case 8: The True Catholic Church

URL: <http://www.truecatholic.org/>



The "True Catholic Church" is a site maintained by a handful of followers who wish to continue the legacy of Vatican I and completely rejects Pope John XXIII (and the succeeding popes) as well as the reforms he initiated through the Second Vatican Council. The site refers to the Church in the Vatican as "false" and the pope residing there as "impostor." The church exists in an undisclosed location and promotes its own papacy. The man revered by its followers call him Pope Pius XIII, who has written statements, encyclicals, and condemnations since the 1998 conclave which appointed him successor of Peter.

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In 1996, *Time's* Robert Wright wrote that "out on the fringe of the World Wide Web, beyond mainstream religion, storefront preachers and offbeat theologians are springing up like mushrooms." In the turn of the millennium, Helland observes, that the trend "has become even more prominent, since individuals can now create their own websites without having to learn HTML," the programming language for creating websites. The increase of free web hosting and design services, and certainly the advent of "blogging" have contributed to this trend.

Along with the official voice of the Church, some unofficial, personal and outright hoax versions of our religion are available to net visitors wherever they are in the planet. Both voices are firmly established, fully grounded in the World Wide Web. This is reminiscent of Pope John Paul II juxtaposing the Internet alongside the ancient Roman Forum as two similar venues where intellectual minds of varying magnitudes converge.

But consider this: Like in the era of Gutenberg, where control of information has shifted with the development of a mass communication tool, we might have to agree with recent scholars observing that the continued development of Internet and cyberspace communications might result yet again to a "radical shift in who is in control of information." Ordinary people are now able to propagate so-called doctrines and upload them in the same space where official Church teachings also reside. Net visitors, on the other hand, are free to visit any religious website they want with a click of the mouse and stroke of the keyboard.

Having said that, it might be then useful to look at the Internet and cyberspace beyond its utility and indeed as a place, a virtual place that people can visit, access, log on to in order to gratify some need and serve some purpose. Internet scholar A. Markham validates this through his 1998 detailed ethnographic study of Internet participation. He found that people indeed viewed the Internet as a tool and a place, and even as a "state of being" – and each level of perception affected the interactions of the individuals with the Internet environment.

Helland said this finding has a significant impact upon the manner in which individuals will attempt to "do" religion online. Further he said: "Organized religious websites that are using the Internet only as a tool to communicate 'information about' their religions will not have the ability to meet the religious needs of those who want more from the medium." In this case, the scholar added, "it is the popular religious sites or the unofficial religious sites that are providing the preferred environment for the online practitioners."

This statement could not be quantified easily therefore, it can only be taken as speculative in nature and at best, representing only an opinion rather than a fact. We cannot be certain of preference for popular religion in the Web with no scientific inquiry to back up our claim. However, we can agree that the Internet has become more than a search tool for net visitors. Some studies indicate "that people who connect to the Internet are more likely to use it for cultivating their social and cultural proclivities" (Matei and Ball-Rokeach, 2001). For many people, cyberspace is a real space. It is an acceptable medium for religious and spiritual participation. Helland says, it is becoming an environment – a place – where people can "be" religious if and when they choose to be.

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