

ONLINE RELIGION

Religious Practices in Cyberspace: The Web as "Church"

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Scholarly work on religion in cyberspace has gradually built up, along with the spread of Internet use since the mid-1990s. Western scholars have analyzed the phenomenon of Internet use beyond the academic or professional fields and into man's search for meaning and expression of religious beliefs.

Some scholars sought to systematize for purposes of research and academic work the myriad forms of religious expression in cyberspace. One such scholar, Anastasia Karaflogka, came up with the phrases "religion on cyberspace" and "religion in cyberspace." According to her, "religion in cyberspace" is any form of religious belief that is created and exists exclusively in cyberspace, where it enjoys a considerable degree of so-called "virtual reality." Based on the previous session and upon this definition, "religion in cyberspace" can be taken synonymously with "online religion."

Virtual reality as we know is a kind of technology that allows users to interact (visually with images on the computer screen, thru the hearing sense by means of speakers or headphones and more recently, thru touch) with a computer-simulated environment. We will be able to view some examples of this later. But for now, it is enough to say that "religion in cyberspace" has no counterpart in the physical realm. Thus, its followers gather in front of their own computer screens and participate in religious rituals and practices online. Here, Morten Hoejsgaard says, the Internet functions as a "creative or formative environment fostering new religious contents and activities online."

"Religion on cyberspace," on the other hand (in Karaflogka's terminology), refers to "the information uploaded by any religion, church, individual or organization, which also exists and can be reached in the off-line world." This definition corresponds to our understanding of "religion online" again based on the previous session. Here, the primary function of the Internet is to "mediate information on religious contents and activities that has already been established or defined by various religious traditions outside cyberspace." We have already seen in the previous session how religions on cyberspace make use of online possibilities for information dissemination and propagation of the faith, while adopting practices that may well be categorized as "online religion" or "religion in cyberspace."

In this presentation, our concern is to show first, a useful framework for categorizing a "religion in cyberspace" or "online religion" put forth by Morten Hoejsgaard and then present some examples taken from the Internet itself. Again, we shall be touring cyberspace and will see by briefly analyzing a handful of websites how the Internet is used to serve man's search for meaning and faith expression. How effective it is in doing so is the subject of another study. Our goal here is to only show the different forms of alternative religious practices in the Internet today.

Yahoo! turns up close to 10 million results in the search for the key words "virtual church." For the words "cyberchurch," the search engine turns up some 27,100 results. Google, on the other hand, turns up more than 6 million results in the search for "virtual church" and close to 20,000 results for "cyberchurch." Not all of these results represent religious groups – some turn out to be news or titles of articles and scholarly essays. Yet several new media scholars estimate that there are more than a million single web pages with religious content of the Internet today. How large those religious groups are in terms of membership cannot be easily identified but the staggering number of religious websites alone means that religious expression has indeed taken root in cyberspace and continues to grow. The Barna Research Group in California projects that by 2010, fully 10 percent of the population of the United States, or 50 million people, will be relying entirely on the Internet for their religious experience. Double that number will get at least some spiritual experience via the Internet. (source: <http://www.infotoday.com/linkup/lud110102-conhaim.shtml>) This trend still needs validation here in Asia, but as long as Western culture remains the locus of Internet communication the statistic already foretells what the future holds for religious expression in cyberspace.

Morten Hoejsgaard's analysis of a number of what she calls "cyber-religion" (or "religion in cyberspace" or "online religion"), has led her to devise a modeling framework for what characterizes a pure "cyber-religion" or "online religion." Three parameters should be tested, Hoejsgaard said. These are:

1. Mediation
2. Content, and
3. Organization

These three parameters are plotted to comprise a chart with three axes, at the center of which is what ought to be a pure "cyber-religion" or "online religion." Each parameter measures a corresponding sub-parameter and the closer this measure is to the center of the chart the closer that religion in question simulates a cyber-religion or online religion.

The parameter "mediation" spreads from virtual or disembodied communication to body-centered or embodied communication. The more a ritual, for example, is conducted online the more virtual or disembodied the communication is. The more the followers are directed to a physical church outside the Internet to worship, the more body-centered or embodied the communication is and consequently, the farther the religion in question belongs to the so-called "cyber-religion" or "online religion" category.

As to "content," Hoejsgaard says, the spread goes from a reflection of Internet culture to a reflection of traditional religious expression. A religion's reflection of Internet culture follows what Yves Lambert, sociologist of religion, describes as the trends or expressions of the religious landscape within contemporary society. Lambert puts it as: "this-worldliness, self-spirituality, dehierarchization and dedualization, parascientificity, pluralistic, relativistic, fluctuating, seeking faiths, and loose network-

elements needed to administer the sacrament along with a Scripture-based explanation as to how online Baptism can be valid. However, towards the end of the link followers are directed to related websites whose groups are engaged in real-life immersion in water in case they would want to experience that same kind of Baptism.

Infinite Church's weekly schedule is interesting. Because the time reference is the Central Time Zone in North America, visitors coming from outside the U.S. or Canada are encouraged to logon at the appropriate times to be able to join the online services. Non-English speaking surfers will find it impossible to follow the liturgies and prayer services. For those who are inclined to acquire an exclusive online faith experience, a computer software should be downloaded for free from the website itself to enable them full participation in the worship sessions. There is an option to use the Internet software to avoid the downloading process and undergoing the tutorial sessions for using the software but this provision was disabled at the time of research.

The site also offers a virtual tour of the Infinite Church with a slide show of the auditorium where the supposed worship takes place, the prayer room of the virtual church, the exterior as well as the entrance to the church along with the pastors that facilitate the worship.

Infinite Church's Weekly Schedule		
8:00 PM Central	Sunday	Worship Service
8:00 PM Central	Monday	Prayer Meeting
8:00 PM Central	Tuesday	Group Bible Study with Bunny
9:00 PM Central	Thursday	Book of James Study with Joshua Richards
9:00 PM Central	Saturday	Fellowship Night with BfChris

The over-all feeling of a neophyte visitor of this site is that the Church itself is real and a good way of spending time in cyberspace.

Case 2. Virtual Church of the Blind Chihuahua

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

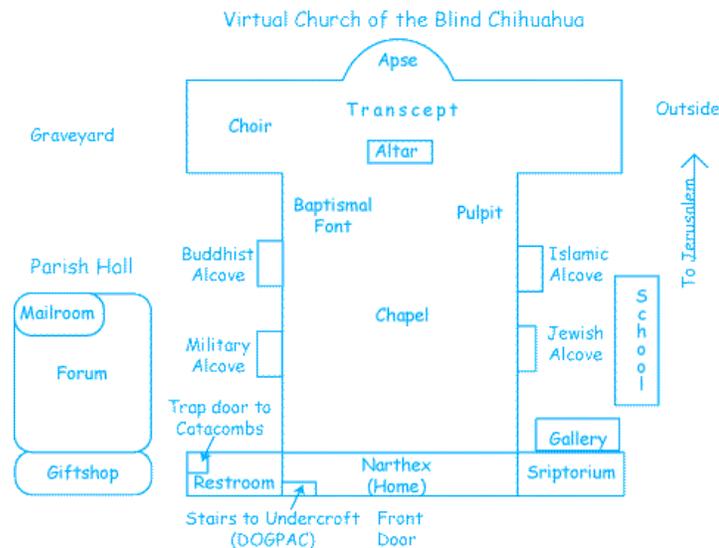


The site dogchurch.org claims to be a sacred place named after a small dog with cataracts who barked sideways at strangers because it could not see where they were. In the same way, the cite developers say, we are the blind Chihuahua – making more or less joyous noise in the direction where we think God is, and expecting a reward in return. It is interesting that in the home page, just below where the site's logo is displayed, internal links to Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Baha'i are presented. Within the enclosed texts, links to other related websites are provided.

The site's offerings include articles about what the members call "canned theology" or their set of beliefs categorized as liberal, conservative and wacko. It does not affiliate

with any religious tradition notwithstanding the references given to other religious traditions. "You may bring your dogma, but only if it doesn't bite" reads an entry message. The first part of the statement of beliefs also reads: "I believe that the members of the Virtual Church of the Blind Chihuahua believe all kinds of different things."

The site map is interesting because it presents the floor plan of the virtual church showing the different rooms both visitors and devotees can visit.



It is interesting that in dogchurch's "Chapel," devotees are offered liturgies from different Christian traditions. The link to Greek Orthodox, for example, directs to the website of the Greek Orthodox Church in America (<http://www.goarch.org/en/chapel/text.asp>). The liturgies and prayers, however, are suggestive that they ought to be conducted in the presence of a congregation, in a physical church, and not so much in the privacy of the home, in-front of a computer screen.

The site's Chapel also offers the so-called "Book of Uncommon Worship," which we suspect are original prayers crafted by members and officials of the virtual church. There is also a column of homilies in the Chapel, notably comprised of exhortations of members suited for Christian feasts like Christmas, Easter and Advent, among others. The different "alcoves," the equivalent of side-chapels in centuries-old Christian basilicas, are devoted to mainstream religions like Judaism, Islam, Baha'i, Buddhism, Hinduism, and interestingly one that is named "Military." The last alcove is filled with audio files of hymns and prayers as well as links to related websites (e.g. The Wounded Soldier Project at <http://www.woundedwarriorproject.org>), dedicated to soldiers and their families involved in the Global War on Terror.

The site is mono-lingual with English as its only mode of presentation. It has a library called "Reference Shelf" with titles of books listed according to subjects and linked to an online bookstore. Weblinks are provided e.g. to the site of the Association for Religion and Intellectual Life (the online "CrossCurrents" magazine at

<http://www.aril.org/>), giving the dogchurch site the impression of a portal – a virtual place where one starts and ends his/her journey into cyberspace.

Case 3. Don't go to church, go to Vurch.com

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



Vurch.com is interesting in that it does not affiliate itself with any religion. In fact, in its welcome remarks to visitors, vurch.com promises to be a place of respite and reflection without religion. Religion is seen as non-fitting to what people really need. Therefore, the site is posted as an alternative to established religious institutions and traditions. The welcome remark reads: "Think about life, another way of being, wonder at what it's all for, take a different route, see if God will answer back. Imagine there's no religion."

Interestingly, however, the site developers acknowledge some Christian (and Catholic) groups to have inspired them to set up the website. Among those acknowledged in the page "Thanks" are The Jesuits in Ireland, Christian Aid Foundation in the UK, the spiritual website beliefnet.com which aims to assist faith seekers – not just Christian faith seekers but seekers of other religious traditions as well e.g. Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism and Islam. "Sticky music," which is set up by three musical geniuses affiliated with a worshipping community in Scotland, provided the musical backdrop in vurch.com's "The Room with a View," and "The Dream Room."

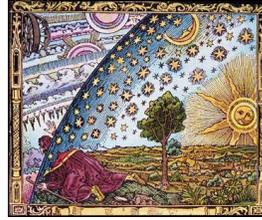
Although the site is inspired by traditional religions, there is certain uniqueness in the presentations that characterize it as "cyber-religion" or "online religion." For one, it takes visitors away from any notion of religion. The phrase "Don't go to church, go to vurch.com" is displayed prominently on the home page as well as on a signature vurch T-shirt that is sold online. Second, the prayers are by no means known formulas in Christianity or even Catholicism. Visitors are encouraged to post their own prayer on the so-called "Vurch prayer wall" to be viewed by other vurch-goers or for God's private reading only. Visitors are also asked to share their view of what religion is in a section called "Bastard Theology" and to submit a song (any kind from classical, pop to ambient) which they think is religious enough to be sang in Church. This, in fact, is the site's only reference to an offline worshipping environment but still maintains no particular doctrine that can identify the followers or the site itself with any established religious tradition.

Overall, the impression is that this site is a good example of "cyber-religion" or "online religion." Vurch.com exists only in cyberspace and has no physical counterpart whatsoever in the offline environment. The design aesthetic reflects pop-culture although there are few images of Catholic emblems that are reminiscent of worship in a physical church. Rituals do not actually play any part in the whole worship process in vurch.com and in their place, prayer, specifically individual prayer – the exact kind

of prayer and the most any individual can do in front of their computer screen – is given primary importance.

Case 4. Technosophy

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



The Technosophy website exists to promote the belief that everything on earth that we experience with our senses, including the universe itself, is technologically organized. From its Greek roots, *tekein* (to fabricate) and *logos* (word or discourse), the word "technology" is taken to mean not just the man-made gadgets that we see functioning but a "discourse or discussion on how to make things" – everything including the human body. The additive *-sophy* from the Greek word *sophia* meaning skill or wisdom makes for the word "technosophy." The word "technosophy" was coined by the site's maintainer, Terry Alden, to mean the "science of making or fabricating."

Technosophy's mission statement further reads:

The Motto of Technosophy is "Deus ex machina" or "God from a machine." In application to the concepts to be presented, it emphasizes the dual aspect of the human situation, the physical body as machine or collection of technologies and the spiritual or "soul" aspect which seems to be behind and directing the physical biocomputer and mechanical systems. The "Ghost in the Machine" is another expression of the mysterious mind (or spirit) vs. body relationship.

"Deus ex machina" comes from the scholarly study of Greek and Roman drama. It refers to a device often employed in ancient plays in which a god intervenes at the end of the drama and makes everything work out right, as though by waving a magic wand. The dictionary gives: "Any artificial, forced, or improbable device used to resolve the difficulties of a plot." As technology becomes increasingly powerful and "magical," it may well resolve, one way or another, the difficulties of the World Plot, that Divine Comedy in which we all participate as we "strut and fret" our brief hour upon the world stage.

Science is the *de-facto* religion of our time in the sense that it provides us our paradigm or world view. It tells us what is proper for us to believe ... about everything. True, it has ignored some of the more perplexing problems, like spirit, psychic and other paranormal phenomena, etc. It has attempted (probably unsuccessfully) to demystify our outlook on the world, which is ironic since it has also provided so much evidence of the miraculous and magical nature of life. This is a good place to state Arthur C. Clark's Law of Technology: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magick."

Much of the "philosophy of technology" was given by Dr. Marshall McLuhan, whom the writer was privileged to know. Many of McLuhan's ideas will be presented here as they

are integral to this discussion. McLuhan believed that modern electrical technologies are causing a shift in human cognition back toward the mystical mode of consciousness which he associated with tribal cultures. The right hemisphere of the brain is being stimulated leading to an holistic outlook on things which is reviving everything from the occult to spiritualism and religion. Technosophy embraces the idea of spiritual wisdom brought about by a profound study of and appreciation for technology in its broadest implications.

Interestingly, this text was last update in April 1999. Entering the so-called "Technosophy Maze" on the site's homepage, visitors are led to also read the cyber-religion's 12 Precepts. One of them reads: "There is no LIVING organism in the Universe which is not an example of technology or an example of a technologically-organized system intelligently optimizing some form of survival strategy incorporated into the design and performance of its attendant biophysical mechanisms."

There is also the so-called "Architect's Office" which is a section devoted to the writings of Terry Alden, the founder of Technosophy and maintainer of the Technosophy website. The "Lunar Lounge" opens to a web address where sites relevant to Technosophy are listed – some are feminist movements, others are volunteering work. The "Blue Drawing Room" is another repository of resources for Technosophy followers. It is a virtual library of weblinks and articles on topics such as astrology, mythology, metaphysics and technology, virtual religions and others. The site also has an art gallery featuring works by Matisse, Monet, Toulouse-Lautrec and others.

Apart from these offerings, the site itself has no noted ritual or worship mechanism for the practice of Technosophy. Serious followers are only directed to other virtual religions featured in the Blue Drawing Room.

Case 5. The Church at Fun City

URL: <http://www.funama.de/>



"The Fun City" is a virtual urban community that is complete with all the amenities imaginable in an offline environment. The opening page shows the city map where each point that is labeled (e.g. bank, cinema hall, the city hall and even fire department) links to a particular place the browser can visit. One interesting feature is the "church" of the virtual city. The church is essentially "Christian" in its belief system and the pastors and staffs are all real people. However, it resides entirely in cyberspace. There is no such place existing in the physical realm, not anywhere in Germany or in Europe's German speaking countries. The processes inside the virtual church can only be done online. Thus, it qualifies according to our understanding of "cyber-church" or "online religion."

The panorama of the city itself is quite telling. The church, or the image of it, is dwarfed by the towering structures shown on the map. At quick glance of the vista, the place of worship is not easily distinguishable. There is also no label on it unlike the neighboring chat center, for example, or the city hall. Also worth mentioning is the fact that the virtual church is portrayed stereotypically, with its run down, moss colored façade and centuries-old look. However modern the city is and especially given that it resides in cyberspace, the church is still thought of as a structure of antiquity.

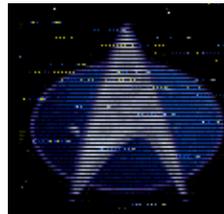
Upon clicking it, the browser is led to the interior entrance of the church and given directions where to go. The main worship area is actually a chatroom, where people interact among themselves like they normally would in any Internet chatroom. The presumption here is, however, that the subjects of discussion strictly revolve around Church topics with no hanky-panky in between.

Upon entering the so-called "Pfarrhaus," the browser can choose to chat with "real" counselors residing in separate virtual rooms. These counselors, at least two of whom are wearing religious habits, are ready to listen and give advice to anyone in need. They have their own photos uploaded so that the browser knows somehow who he/she will be interacting with. The apparent disembodied communication using the computer and Internet in effect becomes an embodied one, to some extent.

The experience visiting the Church at Fun City is anything but uninteresting and stale. A sacramental encounter with God may not be readily verified but the expert use of technology to simulate offline activities such as counseling and chatting with religion-minded people can already prepare the ground for such a deeper union in other venues: private prayer or Bible reading, for example.

Case 6. The Virtual Church of Scotland

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



There are other examples of using technology to express faith and practice religion online. The "Virtual Church of Scotland" (<http://www.webchurch.org/>), for instance, positions itself as the "spiritual home on the Internet." It has all the typical accompaniments of a religion website e.g. inspirational stories and quotes as well as prayers. But an interesting addition is the interpretation of Star Trek episodes from a Christian point of view and in the process leaving some moral lessons to browsers. There is also a section on different Christian religions, among them Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian and others.

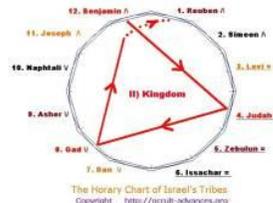
Case 7. The Church of Fools

URL: <http://churchoffools.com/>



The “Church of Fools” (<http://churchoffools.com/>) is another example where the concept of “virtuality” – from the space itself to the rituals – is central to the functioning of this cyber-church sponsored by the Methodist Church, U.K. To enter the church, as a cartoon character and move around as such requires a specific version of Shockwave software. Only then will any browser can navigate him/herself throughout the virtual edifice. There is a section called “View Movie Clips” where prayers like the “Our Father” as well as group chat and a sermon can be seen in animated format.

Case 8. Other virtual churches



Webring.com (<http://n.webring.com/hub?ring=virtualchurchoft>) hosts a collection of 13 virtual church sites that “allow for a little breath of distance (and even humor) within our basic respect and caring toward ourselves and our religions, histories, cultures, philosophies, spiritualities, literatures, and sciences.” The list includes “Divination and Meditation: Paths to Enlightenment” (<http://www.pathstoenlightenment.com/>), the “Timeless Ink Press” (<http://www.timeless-ink-press.com/index.html>) where magic and the world of fairies expressed in poetry meets man’s search for meaning, the Occult page (<http://occult-advances.org/>) where Jewish mysticism, alchemy and some Hindu practices meet, and the Guided Meditations on <http://www.fyrewind.com/>

Conclusion

John Naisbitt describes contemporary society as a “Technologically Intoxicated Zone... defined by the complicated and often paradoxical relationship between technology and our search for meaning.” The indicators of this state of affairs are that people in contemporary society seem to prefer “quick fix, from religion to nutrition... fear and worship technology... blur the distinction between real and fake... love technology as a toy... live (their) lives distanced and distracted.

Mark C. Taylor perceives the cultural environment of contemporary society at large to be virtual and religious at the same time. He writes: “Processes that have long seem natural and relations that have long seemed material now appear to be information processes and virtual realities.” And religion evidently is no exception to this trend.

After the short and not-so in-depth analysis of a handful of cyber-religious websites, we have seen that indeed the realm of religious expression in cyberspace is expanding as well as gaining sophistication e.g. in the presentations as well as in the technical add-ons. We have seen varied formats and design aesthetics that establish identity, like that of a corporate entity, as well as increase the sites' visual appeal. We have also seen how, complementary to texts, audiovisual materials were included along with familiar emblems used by mainstream religions in order to simulate the worship environment in the offline world. It might be reasonable to think, however, that the belief systems presented in some of the sites were devised only by individuals or institutions who wish to assert themselves as well as their so-called "doctrine" in the new medium and in the process, to gain followers.

But do these initiatives actually constitute what can be regarded a "church"? Is there valid evidence, up till now, suggesting that online worship – in front of a computer screen and in the absence of a community sharing the same belief – can be more effective or can replace altogether the rituals, chants and prayers of a group of people within a physical location? In short, can cyberspace be the focal point of devotion?

Considering the idea of a virtual Jerusalem, Stephen O'Leary asks the same question:

"Is it possible to imagine that Jewish people could ever come to accept and practice a purely virtual enactment of this ritual? Isn't the physicality of the place itself something that cannot be dispensed with? How could a cyber-temple replace the actual wall of the real one?"

A cyber-religion or online religion in its purest form, says Hoejsgaard is one that is 100 percent virtually communicated, one that reflects the Internet culture, and one that detaches itself completely from any institutionalized religion and by itself exists without any hierarchy, devoid of structure.

We briefly return to Yves Lambert's description of today's religious landscape. He said: "this-worldliness, self-spirituality, dehierarchization and dedualization, parascientificity, pluralistic, relativistic, fluctuating, seeking faiths, and loose network-type organizations (indeed, religion without religion)."

Could we then ask a basic question? Is cyber-religion or online religion, in its purest form, a religion indeed? In order to verify this, a next logical step can be taken i.e. to ask directly the followers of cyber-religion or online religion. What sort of spiritual gratifications do they derive from online worship? Is there indeed an other-worldly experience online, an experience comparable to the sacramentals of the Christian Church, for example? If so, how do these online devotees translate their online experience into living in the offline world? Theologians could also shed some light on this issue.

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Technosophy
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