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## Introduction

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### **The Weird, the Wonderful, and What's Next**

The Internet is changing the face of religion worldwide. This is a simple but very important claim, one that this book is beginning to document in part to urge others to pay closer attention in the future. The Internet has suffered from an excessively effusive press—it has been hyped and demonized in the popular media to a point where fewer and fewer people may care to pay attention. But the rapidly expanding social-scientific literature on the Internet is discovering the truth behind the hyperbole. Cyberspace is not quite as unusual a place as sometimes predicted. Life in cyberspace is in continuity with so-called “real life,” and this holds true for religion as well. People are doing online pretty much what they do offline, but they are doing it differently. Activity is being mediated electronically, and this mediation allows things to be done in ways that are somewhat new and sometimes entirely innovative. We are just beginning to grasp some of the consequences of these changes—which are often rather subtle—for the social life of users. The consequences for religion are as yet largely unknown. Will this new way of being religious make a difference in how religion is conceived and practiced in the future? A brief look at some instances of religion online helps indicate how the Internet is indeed making a difference.

In the rapidly expanding world of Neopagan belief and practice, people belong to covens, not churches, and the term “coven” has a very distinct meaning in this tradition. Gerald Gardner, considered by many the father of modern Wicca, declared that a model coven consisted of “six ‘perfect couples’ of men and women, plus a leader. Ideally, the couples would be married or be lovers, in order to produce the best harmony and results in magic” (Guiley 1999: 68). Janet and Stewart Farrar, whose own books have popularized Wicca far beyond the British Isles, concur, opining that larger covens tend to become too depersonalized (Farrar and Farrar 1984: 180). Among other popular writers on Wicca and Witchcraft, similar definitions obtain (e.g., Buckland 1987: 53; RavenWolf 1993: 20; Guiley 1999: 68). These definitions are marked by two important consistencies: (a) the small size of the group, which ideally leads to (b) a level of trust and intimacy usually possible only after extended interpersonal association (cf. Berger 1999).



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Something mysterious happens, though, when covens go online—when they become “cybercovens.” Older, established definitions are traded in for newer, often less precise understandings of what a Wiccan working group is or can become. Traditionally led by a High Priestess initiated into a particular lineage and heir to the office by dint of long training and preparation, covens often carefully screen potential members, and participation is by invitation only. Online, however, the notion of a coven has become considerably more elastic. Lisa McSherry, for example, who as Lady Ma’at is High Priestess of the cybercoven JaguarMoon, defines a “cybercoven” simply as “a group of people of an earth-based religious faith or belief system who interact primarily, if not solely, through the Internet and/or the World Wide Web” ([www.jaguarmoon.org/whatis.htm](http://www.jaguarmoon.org/whatis.htm)). Here, though, she says little about what that interaction entails or how large the group should be. Moonglade ([www.angelfire.com/wizard/moonglade](http://www.angelfire.com/wizard/moonglade)) also calls itself an online coven, though at this point it is comprised of only two members: the High Priestess, “Serenity,” a fifteen-year-old who has been practicing Wicca since she was thirteen, and “Amethyst Moon,” whose online profile is no longer active. The Coven of the Silver Unicorn ([www.geocities.com/Athens/Styx/5357](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Styx/5357)) exists principally online but hopes to make the transition offline. “The coven accepts one & all,” its membership policy states, “regardless of background.” Finally, consider the Bella Luna Cyber Coven, which has operated as a discussion group through the Yahoo portal since March 2000 and at the time of this writing posts an average of just under sixty messages per month. At this point, Bella Luna has ninety-five members listed, the vast majority of whom, however (including Bella Luna herself, the list owner), have chosen to disclose no personal information beyond their gender in the available group profile folders. Indeed, nearly one quarter of Bella Luna members chose not to disclose even so much as their gender.

This illustration of the shift from the offline world to the online indicates two very important social consequences of the Internet: a crisis of authority and a crisis of authenticity (cf. Cowan forthcoming; Dawson 2000: 43–44; Dawson 2001: 6–7). First, because there is no mechanism by which information posted to or claims made on the Internet may be vetted beforehand, the World Wide Web produces what some have either lauded or deplored as the phenomenon of “instant experts” (cf. Berger and Ezzy, this volume; Hadden and Cowan 2000b; Wright 2000). One wonders, for example, just how a fifteen-year-old girl with only two years experience in the Craft could legitimately promote herself as a High Priestess. Second, has the meaning of the concept not been irretrievably compromised if in the online world a “coven” can be created by anyone regardless of experience, can include as many people as wish to join, regardless of the interpersonal dynamics that emerge in covens offline, and can exist (in many cases) as little more than chatty discussion lists rather than serious religious working groups? If a coven can mean anything its online users want it to mean, has it not ceased to mean anything at all? While we are

not suggesting that this is a necessary consequence of religious participation on the Internet, this shift in sensibilities happened online because of unique features of the Internet as a way of bringing people together. The existence, nature, and use of the medium made a difference.

The substitution of a cyberspace for a real place, of a virtual community for a physically present one, often has a strange leveling effect on religions (Beaudoin 1998: 56–58). The obviously constructed and pluralistic character of religious expressions online tends to have a relativizing effect on the truth claims of any one religion or its authorities. Rather than appearing unreal, with enough exposure to the Internet religious people may come “to doubt the absolute claims of sacredness and permanence that a religious site can make in the ‘real world’” in light of the obvious “ephemerality and heightened access [to] religion in cyberspace” (Beaudoin 1998: 58). Moreover, the easy coexistence of so many different and openly heterodox views in cyberspace exposes the Net surfer to a more fluid doctrinal environment, one that has the potential to encourage individual religious and spiritual experimentation. Ironically, it would appear, this holds equally true for religious traditions like contemporary Neopaganism, which is only a few decades old, as it does for traditions that have flourished for millennia. A few other examples of the new face of religion/spirituality in cyberspace will help to indicate other aspects of the quiet revolution in religious sensibilities that may be taking place with the aid of the Internet.

In India, when a woman is warned of impending bad luck by an astrologer, she seeks, as is common in her culture, to avert the cruel fate by appealing to the gods. “In the old days, [she] might have taken her astrologer’s advice literally and made the 1,450 kilometer (900 mile) journey to a temple on the southern tip of India to pay respects to Shani—the Hindu god she was said to have angered” (Srinivasan 2002). Today she turns to the Web page [www.prarthana.com](http://www.prarthana.com), where, with the click of a mouse and a credit card charge, she can choose from a list of four hundred temples and arrange for an appropriate *puja* (ceremony) to be performed on her behalf. In this way, millions of Hindus living in diaspora outside India can arrange for various religious rites: marking a birth or a death, help in securing a job, or aid in averting illness. In return they receive a package in the mail from the temple, certifying that the ceremony has been performed and providing a sample of the food blessed and placed on the altar as a sacrifice to the god or gods. Likewise, the devotees of different gurus, temples, and religious organizations in India can go online to participate virtually in a variety of festivities and rites. When traveling they can even continue a lively discourse with their guru, meditate, or experience *satsang* (a group meeting for guidance and support) through the use of e-mail, Internet Relay Chat, and Webcasts (*The Times of India* 2003).

What are we to make of these new possibilities? Is the Hindu tradition being trivialized or strengthened by such cyber-rites and services? We should not scoff and rush to judge these developments. Seeing them and other cyber-religious

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acts for what they are will require a careful consideration of the nature and history of the traditions involved and an assessment of the thoughts and feelings of those using such services. Indirectly, the Internet may be changing many of the basic religious/spiritual sensibilities of users, but sometimes in ways that actually mark a return to an historically earlier understanding of religious experiences and life (see O'Leary, this volume; and Dawson, this volume). While there are changes, more often than not there are also important continuities with traditional practices—if these practices are fairly and honestly perceived.

In Canada a young, ordinary boy named Adam has discovered an extraordinary talent. He can heal people at a distance using the Internet (Gill 2003). People with inoperable or untreatable terminal illnesses contact his Web site at [www.distanthealing.com](http://www.distanthealing.com). If they are selected for help, he requests a color picture of them. Then a time is arranged for both parties to sit quietly in their homes, whether across the country or just blocks away. At these times, Adam concentrates on the picture and claims that he can see, layer by layer, into the very physical being of the sick person. He sees more as well: "I can see a physical layer: the heart beating, guts moving, that sort of stuff. Then there's a layer that's just like a hollow image of the person and there are green dots where there are problems—or green bulges, depending on the problem" (Gill 2003: F7). As though he were wearing a set of virtual-reality goggles, he claims he can see the illnesses and by bombarding them with "energy" can destroy them. Sometimes he moves his hands—as in a virtual-reality game—to split or pop cancerous tumors.

The story is incredible, but tales of such miraculous healings are common to religious traditions from around the world and throughout history. Following the example of Jesus, they are frequently part of the grounds for declaring someone a saint in the Catholic Church. But the use of the Internet, while seemingly not essential to the result, allows it to happen much more easily, free from the scrutiny of churches, the state, the medical profession, and simply other people. Moreover, as Adam's parents stress, the Internet allows the healings to happen at all, since they are intent on protecting his identity and his right to live the life of an ordinary teenager. It makes this unusual combination of extraordinary, direct access and nearly complete anonymity possible. With the imitation by others that is sure to come, such so-called "faith healing" is likely to become an increasingly common phenomenon online, precisely because it can be electronically mediated. Of course, some American televangelists have been trying for years to reach out and cure the ills of their TV audiences, crying out through the screen and sending the healing love of God to those afflicted in some way. But television as a broadcast medium lacks the personal touch of the Internet at its best.

In ways illustrated by these few examples and many others raised in the essays collected in this book, the Internet is adding an interesting and important twist to the religious life of a growing number of people. It is intensifying

changes already afoot in society and it is broaching entirely new possibilities. But it is also fomenting change simply by helping religious groups to do what they have always done better. It is allowing more people to reach out to more others, in more ways, to a greater extent than ever before in history. The diffusion and clash of religious worldviews has taken a quantum leap forward, but so, it is hoped, has our ability to learn about and from each other and develop ways to live in harmony.

### **The Internet, Society, and Religion**

It has become something of a commonplace in Internet studies, religious or otherwise, to comment on the recent birth and remarkable growth of the computer technology that makes the Internet and its sweeping cultural impact upon us possible. We will not rehash these claims here and urge readers who are interested to consult some of the excellent works on the subject (e.g., Castells 2001; Gillies and Cailliau 2000; Rheingold 1993; Slevin 2000; Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002). But a few points are in order. First, it is important to note that while the Internet has existed technically since the early 1960s, the application by which it is best known—the World Wide Web—is little more than a decade old. The speed and extent to which the Internet has been embraced by a wide diversity of people in such a short period of time are unparalleled in human history. The rate of growth is staggering. Worldwide, the number of Internet users is estimated to have been 16 million in 1995, 378 million in 2000 (Castells 2001: 260), and more than 500 million in 2002 (Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002: 11). If for no other reason, this phenomenal rate of growth assures the importance of continued research into the Internet and its effects on society.

Second, and somewhat paradoxically, it is equally important to realize that the Internet has not grown everywhere. Despite the industry rhetoric and commercial hyperbole about “global connectivity” and the “universalization” of access and meaningful participation, the statistics reveal that a very real “digital divide” exists in the world (cf. Castells 2001; Norris 2001). Any informed discussion of the Internet and its relationship to culture and society must give serious consideration to the division between the Internet haves and have-nots. As Castells points out, for example, “London has more Internet domains than the whole of Africa” (2001: 264) and less than 1 percent of Africa’s population are Internet users (2001: 260). This divide, he continues, exists in terms of both access to Internet technology (i.e., who gets to go online) and the production of Internet resources (i.e., who decides what one finds online), and in both regards the asymmetry is growing (Castells 2001: 216). Hence research must be conducted into not only who is using the Internet and for what purpose but also how production of Internet content both reflects other deeply embedded social and cultural divisions and further contributes to them.

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Finally, as suggested above, the Internet is both a mirror and a shadow of the offline world. That is, there is very little in the real world that is not electronically reproduced online, and very little online that has no offline foundation or referent. This means that much of today's online activity is rather pedestrian and anticlimactic when compared to the initial hype and rhetoric. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, e-mail remains the most common online activity by far ([www.pewinternet.org](http://www.pewinternet.org)), while searching for information—or what passes for information—comes a distant second. Beyond simply providing information, though—whether it be the current rate of exchange between Indian rupees and Thai bhat, the most direct air connection from Berlin to Bali, or the airspeed velocity of an African swallow—what is significant is how Internet content providers are also seeking to reproduce less tangible aspects of social experience. Online bookstores such as Amazon.com, for example, are trying to recreate the real-life experience of browsing the shelves at a bookshop. When a visitor to the Amazon site pulls up a listing for one book, the software running the online store automatically searches out and displays similar books that other “customers” have either considered or purchased. More than once, we have purchased books other than those we were looking for but which were suggested by this feature—not unlike the experience of finding something on the bookstore shelf right next to the book you were seeking. Likewise, many Web sites that deal with one or another aspect of religious life, belief, or practice are seeking ways to communicate not just information about faith but an experience of that faith as well.

Though its presence on the Internet hardly merits the rhetoric of some of its more enthusiastic observers (e.g., Brasher 2001), few would contest that religion has found a solid home online. As Hadden and Cowan note (2000b: 8):

There is scarcely a religious tradition, movement, group, or phenomenon absent entirely from the Net. From the Norse neopaganism of Ásatrú to Christian countercult refutations of it, from Tibetan Buddhist prayer bowls and thangka paintings to Wiccan scrying bowls that come with easy-to-follow instructions, from a disenfranchised Catholic bishop exiled to a non-existent North African diocese to a cyber-monastery established exclusively for non-resident students of Zen.

And the online presence of religion is growing daily. One Pew Internet and American Life study reports that, among Americans, “25% of Internet users have gotten religious or spiritual information at one time.” Once again, though, this impressive figure must be tempered with other Pew-generated data showing that the number of Internet users who seek online religious information on a *daily basis* is considerably smaller, at just under 5 percent (see Larsen, this volume). As we point out in more detail below, more empirical research, informed by insights from sociological theory, is required before we can say with any certainty just what is going on with religion on the Internet and why. This is not to say, however, that no progress has been made.

One of the most useful conceptual distinctions made about religion on the Internet is that between *religion online* and *online religion*. First proposed by Christopher Helland (2000), this distinction grounds many of the analyses contained in this volume, though others have elaborated and refined it (e.g., Hadden and Cowan 2000b; Cowan forthcoming; Young, this volume). Put simply, on the one hand *religion online* describes the provision of information about and/or services related to various religious groups and traditions. This includes the many thousands of Web sites established by congregations, mosques, temples, and synagogues as well as the larger religious institutions of which these are a part. Commercial sites selling an astounding variety of religious books, products, and supplies fall under the same broad rubric of religion online. *Online religion*, on the other hand, invites Internet visitors to participate in religious practices. These practices may range from online prayer, meditation, ritual observance of Catholic Mass, Hindu *puja*, and the Wiccan Sabbat, to spiritual counselling, online Tarot readings, astrological charts, and runecasts (cf. Cowan forthcoming; Cowan and Hadden forthcoming; Hadden and Cowan 2000b). The distinction, however, is not absolute.

An increasing number of Web sites fall somewhere between these extremes, offering their visitors some combination of the two. So perhaps, as Glenn Young (this volume) argues, we should treat this distinction as identifying the end points of a continuum and not as a dichotomy. Increasingly, congregational Web sites, for example, not only tell visitors when services are held and where the church building is located but also offer online prayer chains, devotional pages, and even electronic confessionals. Likewise, altars from a variety of traditions are available online for perpetual e-adoration, confusing the line between the provision of religious information and the actual practice of religion. Even when the use of the Web appears to be confined to providing various religious texts, more may be at stake. In cases like the Qur'an, Muslims can fulfill their religious duty to propagate the revelations of Allah with the recitation of the sacred verses made available online (Bunt 2000; Bunt, this volume).

It is increasingly difficult to separate the mere provision of information from the practice of religion in cyberspace. While Dawson and Hennebray (this volume; cf. Berger and Ezzy, this volume) challenge the notion that the Internet is a very efficient medium for the recruitment of converts, the Internet is used quite commonly for evangelism and proselytization, which are quintessentially religious activities. Likewise the Internet has proven to be an excellent venue for religious antagonism and countermovement (cf. Cowan, this volume; Introvigne 2000; Mayer 2000). And it has become a unique resource for self-proclaimed religious virtuosi, who have found online a potential audience thousands of times greater than they could have dreamed of even a decade ago. Fuller research into religion on the Internet, then, involves the study of new

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ways to be religious and not just the description of new ways to convey religious information.

### Utopias, Dystopias, and Beyond

The first works published on the nature and social impact of the Internet were highly speculative. Regrettably and yet almost inevitably, before serious study could be undertaken commentators began to sing the praise of the transformative and liberating potentials of the new medium (e.g., Barlow 1995; Rheingold 1993; Rushkoff 1994; Turkle 1995). Drawing primarily on their own experiences with the Internet and limited interviews with heavy users, these rather utopian analyses announced the birth of a new “electronic frontier.” A “Wild West” of the imagination fashioned from technology and talk, where people from diverse backgrounds could meet in ways that transcended the physical and social limitations of their daily lives. The first truly global and mass mode of communication, they declared, was vastly expanding the time-and-space parameters of social interaction. With the anonymity of discourse online, people could readily meet individuals from other places, cultures, social classes, ages, and occupations. New and perhaps even multiple identities were possible, as were friendships and conflicts with people of similar and different turns of mind from everywhere in the world. With the rush to go online in the mid-1990s, humankind, we were told, was taking a giant step forward into the “global village” that Marshall McLuhan had predicted in the 1960s.

Other commentators, however, were just as quick to sense the dark side of the Internet. Dystopian texts called for greater caution in embracing the Internet (e.g., Birkerts 1994; Lockhart 1997; Nguyen and Alexander 1996; Slouka 1995; Stoll 1995). The information superhighway, they warned, isolated individuals from real life. It indulged an illusion of sociality that was superficial and furthered the real alienation of modern individuals from themselves, their families, their friends and coworkers, and their neighborhoods. The anonymity of communicating online allowed for deception—men masquerading as women, and teenagers pretending to be professionals ready to offer advice. As popularized by Hollywood technothrillers like *The Net* and *Enemy of the State*, the ever-widening electronic Web gave government agencies unprecedented opportunities to monitor and intervene in the lives of ordinary citizens. The “surveillance” society was coming, and it was largely a creature of the Internet (Lyon 1994). The increasing commercialization of cyberspace also meant that a capitalist agenda would soon dominate this new frontier, stifling true creativity and social protest. Finally, some feared that increased exposure to the Internet, with its growing dependence on images and graphical icons, would lower levels of literacy and the damage the capacity for serious thought as young minds became immersed in the glib, irreverent, and rock video-inspired culture of the new hypertext environment.

The first studies of religion in cyberspace veered towards these utopian and dystopian extremes (e.g., Beckerlegge 2001; Brasher 2001; Brooke 1997; Davis

1998; Lawrence 2000; Ramo 1996; Zaleski 1997). Calling attention to the pervasive presence of religion online, these early investigations tended either to sing the praises of various fascinating possibilities for doing religion in new ways or to condemn the presumed excesses of virtual life, often from the perspective of some more traditional religious commitment. In general, however, the study of religion online has suffered from relative neglect when compared with the burgeoning literature on the political, medical, educational, and even sexual uses and consequences of the Internet.

By the late 1990s things began to change. The first truly empirical studies of life in cyberspace and Internet usage began to appear (see, e.g., the reviews of the literature provided in DiMaggio et al. 2001 and Castells 2001, and the studies collected in Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002). The consequences of the Internet for religion also began to receive some serious consideration (e.g., Bunt 2000; Hadden and Cowan 2000a; Hojsgaard and Warburg, forthcoming; Larsen 2001). But detailed study of how religion is being practiced online is only just beginning, especially the effort to understand developments online in the context of wider social and cultural conditions changing life in late-modern societies (e.g., Castells 2001; Fornas et al. 2002; Jones 1998; Slevin 2000). This book is part of that new effort.

### **“The Medium Is the Message”**

The Internet has become a part of everyday life for hundreds of millions of people (Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002). The fact that we have adopted the technology so fast, however, means we are at risk of overlooking its significance. Like the telephone or television, it has become a routine feature of our daily lives. But communications technologies are rarely neutral in their effects (Fischer 1993; Postman 1985). They are not mere media for the transmission of messages. Rather, as McLuhan (1965) argued so successfully long ago, “the medium is the message.” The habitat in which we live is always changed by our inventions: from money, clocks, trains, and planes to elevators, ATMs, and shopping malls. The cities and nations in which we live have been radically restructured, for example, by the advent of the automobile, and in ways few anticipated. Communications technologies mold the messages we deliver in unanticipated ways as well, crucially influencing our self-conceptions, notions of human relations and community, and the nature of reality itself (e.g., O’Leary, this volume). From the first written word to the World Wide Web, each technology introduced into our lives has its own unique signature and set of social consequences.

Religious uses of the Internet evoke a comparison with the religious uses of television, most notably televangelism, based in turn on the earlier use of radio by religious groups in America (e.g., Frankel 1987). There are important continuities between the religious uses of these technologies that have yet to be explored. But, there are important differences as well—differences that need to be kept in mind in the search for the signature of the Internet.

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At least five crucial differences come to mind: (1) the Internet is an interactive and not simply a broadcast medium; (2) the Internet is truly multimedial; (3) the Internet employs hypertextuality; (4) anyone can launch himself onto the World Wide Web with relative ease and little expense; (5) the Internet is global in its reach. With a comparatively small investment in time, money, and knowledge, Internet users can make their religious views known, at least potentially, to millions of others throughout the world. Television production, on the other hand, is largely the preserve of small cultural elites with the resources required to operate in this expensive medium. While these elites have a vested interest in the status quo, the World Wide Web is open in principle and in practice to almost anyone, no matter how unconventional his opinions. When posting their views online, people are likely to be confronted with alternative opinions posed by people from lands and traditions quite alien to their own (see Lövheim, this volume). Because the flexibility of hypertext allows the Web visitor to select the order of the information presented on a particular site, that information is encountered in a variety of ways simultaneously. Hypertextually speaking, it is entirely possible that no two visitors will view the site in exactly the same way. Both parties to this communication—content provider and Internet visitor—are actively engaged in an interaction that is always unique and largely uncontrolled. These key, qualitative differences in the medium itself have helped to generate the significant quantitative difference in the sheer presence of computer-mediated communication—a difference that in turn magnifies the social and cultural significance of this particular media revolution.

### Questions, Questions, Questions . . .

As the social-scientific study of the Internet begins to mature, spawning numerous new empirical studies of how the Internet is being used and with what results, it is becoming increasingly apparent that scholars of religion need to address some basic questions. At least six research concerns spring to mind:

1. We need more and better studies of who is using the Internet for religious purposes, how they are using it, and why. In this regard we need longitudinal studies to detect any changes that are happening with the passage of time and increased experience online.
2. We need studies of the nature and quality of people's experiences doing religious things online. In this regard we need surveys and interviews of users and case studies of groups, Web sites, or particular activities.
3. We need studies of the relationships between people's religious activities online and offline, as well as their religious activities online and offline and other kinds of activities online and offline. We need to gain a better grasp of the overall social context of cyber-religiosity.

4. We need detailed and comparative studies of the specific religious activities online. How is the Internet being used to engage in such things as prayer, meditation, ritual, education, and organizational tasks, and to what effect?
5. We need studies of how the features of the technology itself are being utilized in the service of religious ends and with what consequences for the intrinsic and the social aspects of religious life? What are the actual and potential implications of hypertextuality for religion, for example? Are there special interface issues affecting the religious uses of this technology? How can the technology be changed or improved to facilitate its religious utilization?
6. We need to discern whether the technological and cultural aspects of the Internet are better suited to the advancement of one style or type of religion over another. Is the preponderance of Neopagan activities online, for example, coincidental? Or is the Internet better suited, for instance, to the practices and organizational structure of Hinduism than Catholicism? What is the case, why, and with what implications for the future?

#### **Click to Continue . . .**

Successful navigation anywhere is a function of two interrelated processes: orientation and intention—knowing where you are when you begin and having some idea where you want to be when you finish. To that end, we suggest that readers begin their exploration of religion in cyberspace with the executive summary of Elena Larsen’s Pew Internet and American Life Project report, “Cyberfaith: How Americans Pursue Religion Online.” It helps to establish some of the base facts from which everything else follows, bringing much needed balance to the commercial hyperbole about Internet usage. Following that, the book is divided into four sections, each of which treats a different dimension of religion in the online world.

In Part I, we explore the nature of online religious communication and community. Christopher Helland introduces the Internet as a medium for religious communication and practice, suggesting that it is “a new space where a freedom of religious expression rules supreme” and that religion online will become more and more a part of everyday life in our technologically mediated world. Following this, we are pleased to be able to reprint Stephen D. O’Leary’s pathbreaking essay on “Cyberspace as Sacred Space.” O’Leary’s essay was the first study to do three things: (1) undertake the serious academic study of religion online; (2) analyze the nature and consequences of performing rituals online; and (3) attempt to understand this new phenomenon in a broader context, that of Walter Ong’s theory of the impact of previous communication technologies on human culture. In all three regards it set an example that is still largely unsurpassed.

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Douglas Cowan's father bought his first computer at the age of 69 and to this day prefers *Lead Pencil* 1.0, but his son was exposed to computers before entering preschool. This is true for most young people in Western societies today. The Swedish scholar Mia Lövhelm investigates how young people—those for whom computers are not an alien technology and who grew up with the Internet as part of daily life—are using the World Wide Web to explore questions of religious identity and community. Since these are questions that are vigorously pursued offline as well, this highlights the important point that the Internet is not a reality separate from “the real world,” but an electronic extension of it. How, though, does community happen online, and how would we know it if we saw it? These are some of the questions addressed by Lorne Dawson as necessary considerations for any informed research into religion on the Internet. Religions traditionally happen in communities; they form and inform communities. If “community” looks different online and off, then what are the consequences for religion? How would we know if online communities are different or even if they exist at all? What criteria need we implement to describe online communities, religious or otherwise, and analyze them effectively? Answering these questions will help us understand more fully what it means to be religious in cyberspace.

Part II moves to a consideration of how culturally mainstream religions—those that have long and deeply embedded cultural traditions offline—have adapted to life on the Web. While it is unlikely that online religious observance will ever supplant offline participation in Catholic Mass, Hindu *puja*, or Muslim *salat*, Glenn Young looks at how some mainstream Christian traditions have used the World Wide Web to bridge the gap between the mere provision of information about religion (“religion online”) and the more complex experience of religious practice through the Internet (“online religion”). In “This Is My Church,” Heidi Campbell discusses how evangelical Christians in Britain have used the Internet as a missionary medium, reaching out to youth in the European club culture. Then, moving from the techno beat of the clubs to the centuries-old call of the *muezzin*, Gary Bunt examines many of the ways in which the Qu’ran has been used online. While the revelation to Muhammed is usually considered the Word of God only when read aloud, Bunt shows how its online presence contributes to the Muslim duty of *da’wa*, the propagation of the faith. Finally, continuing the discussion of the Internet as a site for the creation of religious community, Charles Prebish investigates the emergence of a “cybersangha,” an electronic community binding together Buddhists from around the world.

It is likely that the Internet will benefit some religions more than others and in different ways. Because of their inherently innovative character, we include in Part III a number of examples of how new religious movements, particularly emergent Neopagan groups, are using the Web to experiment and extend their own religious communities and understandings. To begin, we reprint another early and influential study, Lorne Dawson's and Jenna Hennebry's essay, “New Religions and the Internet: Recruiting in a New Public Space” (1999). As people

first turned their attention to religion and the Internet, popular fears arose, partly in the wake of the Heaven's Gate mass suicide of 1997, that the Internet would become a powerful recruiting tool for dangerous "cults." Examining both the Internet as a communicative space and the literature on recruitment to new religious movements, Dawson and Hennebry challenge this notion while also describing some of the other promises and perils of taking religion online. As Helen Berger and Douglas Ezzy point out, however, the cultural anxiety over Internet recruitment still remains. Addressing this concern, their essay considers teen witches both in the United States and Australia and locates the Internet as only one of an array of sources to which young people turn in their quest for religious identity and commitment. Wendy Griffin looks at the emergence of Goddess spirituality and how the Internet has provided an alternative venue for followers of the Goddess to form communities and to contribute to the globalization of various forms of Neopagan belief and practice. We close this section with Marilyn Krogh and Brooke Pillifant's unique look at the House of Netjer, a revival of ancient Egyptian religion which both began and continues online. Krogh and Pillifant trace the origins and nature of this cyber-religion and its all-important shift to an offline presence. In this, they conclude, "the House of Netjer is not a virtual community, sustained only by electronic communication among members. Instead, the House of Netjer is a blend of offline and online relationships."

Part IV concludes our excursions into cyberspace by considering the Internet as a site for religious quests and contests—the search for enlightenment and fulfillment versus attempts to control the religious experiences of others. Following the path of an online pilgrimage to Ireland's Croagh Patrick, Mark MacWilliams discusses how Internet visitors "can simulate a sacred journey for educational, economic, and spiritual purposes." In "Searching for the Apocalypse in Cyberspace," Robert Campbell discusses another example of the confluence of online and offline worlds, showing once again how the Internet may be changing the basic nature of some religious discourses in subtle yet important ways. Finally, using the often controversial Church of Scientology as an example, Douglas Cowan explores how different social movements have pursued religious conflict in cyberspace and what kinds of movements are best served by the hardware, software, and, indeed, the philosophy of the Internet.

Each of the essays in this book demonstrates that the range of religious experience one can encounter on the Internet is broad and varied. Most of these encounters are likely to mirror real-life events and conflicts. But over and over again the evidence also suggests that subtle transformations are under way as the Internet brings new possibilities and dimensions of experience to almost every aspect of religious life. The key is to detect and delineate the elements of continuity and difference, since the future of the Internet as a medium of religiosity will hinge on the presence, nature, and degree of both elements. If what cyberspace offers is too different from the experience of

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religion offline, its utility and appeal will be limited; if it is too much the same, it will be limited as well. But small changes of the right type that expand and enhance our religious sensibilities and levels of satisfaction are bound to leave their mark. We offer these exploratory essays in a new field of research to demonstrate the interesting and important ways we can begin to understand the interface of the one of the oldest and one of the newest cultural resources of humanity.

### A Final Caution

The Internet is a remarkable resource for information on an almost infinite variety of topics. It provides the quickest way to answer our most basic questions. In some instances it can provide access to documents, statistics, and analyses that would have required extraordinary effort, expense, and expertise to attain even a decade ago. It has become the logical first recourse for anyone doing research on almost any subject. This holds true for religious concerns as well, as the essays in this book demonstrate. The Internet has opened up a truly exciting opportunity to learn about the religious beliefs and practices of peoples scattered across the globe and even more to reach out and actually speak to individuals holding these beliefs. True religious dialogue may still be wanting online, but the sheer possibility of such dialogue has changed the spiritual landscape that humanity inhabits forever. The Internet offers us the opportunity to banish the kinds of religious parochialism based on ignorance that have harmed so many throughout the centuries.

But as the essays in this book also starkly reveal, the Internet must be used with caution when investigating religious concerns. Everything is subject to interpretation but, as common sense suggests, some things are more obviously open to interpretation than others. Religion, like politics and sex, as the old adage asserts, is one of those subjects. Extreme care must be taken in using the Internet as a resource for research on religion to discern the explicit and implicit biases of the people and organizations providing the information. In the unregulated environment of cyberspace extreme opinions can be voiced with little fear of the consequences, and propaganda of one sort or another is pervasive (see Cowan, this volume). What you read may or may not be accurate or even true, and it is wise to exercise some skepticism about claims until you can access multiple sources of information and critically compare them. When the views of a religion and its opponents clash, for example, an ethically responsible researcher, whether a student or eminent scholar, must seek to hear and give voice to both sides of any dispute. Ironically, the very freedom with which ideas can be posted online and the sheer scope and diversity of the opinions offered increase the care with which all information must be approached. The Internet makes getting what appear to be “the facts” of any situation incredibly easy, but at a price. We must work harder than with other media to avoid the lure of fool’s gold.

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