# Religion and Online Learning

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## INTRODUCTION

Internationally, r*eligious institutions* are developing online learning for a variety of reasons and purposes. The overall interaction of religion and the Internet has been varied (Dawson & Cowan, 2004). However, as Christopher Helland (2007) observes, "[By 2006] this medium has been embraced by most of the world religious traditions, to the point that not having Internet representation is a rarity for a religious organization, even if it is luddite in its beliefs and practices" (Introduction ¶4). The religious applications of formal online education comprise three main areas: extending the reach of *theological education* (primarily for the training of clergy), expanding opportunities for higher education from religious-sponsored universities and colleges, and facilitating other lifelong learning opportunities for members of the laity. It remains the case that "little has been written and published on distance education in North American theological education" (Amos, 1999, p. 126). Despite an expanding usage of online learning by religious institutions, there has been little published on any of these international efforts. Accordingly, this paper is a synthesis of original research, the authors having contacted leaders and academics from international institutions affiliated with major world religions to discover more about their various applications of online learning.

## BACKGROUND

### Training Clergy

Certainly a shared problem, every major world religion has congregations and adherents in distant or rural areas where they cannot send fully trained graduates from their theological schools as *clergy* or religious leaders. In order to compensate for this problem,

*seminaries*, or schools of theology, have made efforts to train religious leaders using online education (Reissner, 1999; Patterson, 1996). Those efforts have now expanded beyond the target users of religious leaders for *theological education* to the entire *laity* (Cannell, 1999), and the source beyond schools of theology to also include religious-affiliated colleges and universities. For example, even Buddhist organizations in various parts of the world (e.g., Sri Lanka, Thailand) are offering *correspondence education* courses for lay members to become better educated in and integrated into their faith.

### Higher Education and Piety

Beyond strictly theological education, one of the most fascinating trends throughout the decades has been the shifting emphasis of people of faith from receiving strictly theological education to receiving higher education and university degrees. Prior to the 1960s, and at various other periods in history, scholars noted that certain religious leaders had an almost anti-education philosophy and believed that all forms of critical learning based on reason (and not faith) threatened *piety*. (Stewart, personal communication, February 9, 2004; Wriedt, 2004). This attitude of skepticism towards the value of higher education is still seen today among some religious bodies (e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses, the Amish, Mennonites, and the Hutterite Brethren).

Dr. James Stewart, the associate dean in the School of Distributed Learning at Bethany College, has noticed, however, that "most churches are beginning to see secular education integrated with religious values as being just as important in parishioners' preparation for their 'life ministry' as the spiritual training. Prior to the 1960s, …it would have been rare to see a minister with a bachelor's degree, but now all church members are encouraged to pursue college education and even advanced degrees" (Rogers and Howell, 2004). Nu-

merous examples of the emphasis on higher education abound, including the fact that many church organizations now have departments of *collegiate ministries*. Mottos like that of Andrews University (Seventh-Day Adventist), "Educar es Redimir" (to Educate is to Redeem), indicate their view of the tie between education and spiritual progress. The current leader of the fastest-growing Christian church (Gopez-Sindac, 2004), The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, said in a recent worldwide address to the youth of the church, "You need all the education you can get. Sacrifice a car; sacrifice anything that is needed. . . .You belong to a church that teaches the importance of education" (Hinckley, 2001, p. 4). Accordingly, this same church also instituted a program called the Perpetual Education Fund, by which people around the world in poverty-stricken circumstances can acquire educational loans, then receive better employment, repay their loan, and, ideally, be in a better position to lead the church in their local areas. For a variety of reasons, there is an increasing educational need coming from members of many faiths and one of the many ways most religious-affiliated colleges and universities are trying to meet that need is through online learning.

## Church and State

The line between church/religion and state is still indistinguishable in some parts of the world, as it was in the Western world during earlier eras. It could then be said that almost any educational effort within countries of this type is, in essence, the product of a religious institution. This is the case with a majority of the Islamic countries, and when we speak of educational efforts from these countries, each of the 58 member nations of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) has different and changing levels of acceptance of online education. For instance, in many of the Arabo-Islamic countries (e.g., Lebanon), ministries of education do not officially recognize degrees earned through online education (Nasser & Abouchedid, 2000). The ways in which Islam itself is manifested online differs greatly in multicultural states such as Malaysia and Singapore compared to other Islamic states (Ess, 2007). However, it is important to note that Islamic organizations from both Arabic and non-Arabic countries are still very interested in using online learning to accomplish goals such as those that "safeguard the Islamic identity of Muslims in non-Islamic countries" and "make Islamic

culture the basis of educational curricula at all levels and stages" (ISESCO Charter, 1997).

While there is not a clear separation of religion and state in many of the Islamic countries, some countries have recently seen a shift towards a more Western model of secular government, with resulting effects on religious institutions and their educational efforts. These countries, such as India (largely Hindu) and Turkey (largely Muslim), have faced a unique challenge when political and social influences within these countries have tended to marginalize *religious institutions* (K. C. Gupta, personal communication, March 16, 2004; I. Yidiz, personal communication, March 5, 2004). One result of this marginalization has been that it is very difficult for any religious institution in such countries to gather the prestige and resources needed to create and support innovative educational models, such as computer-based distance education. Further still, in countries such as China, there exist political influences that have limited religious education, none of the private institutions of education claiming to be affiliated with any religion (Lin, 2004).

Political and social influences in countries like the United States of America have shifted the attitudes and teaching methodologies of its state-sponsored educational institutions to be founded on a more *pluralistic* identity, sponsoring a general polarization and compartmentalization of teaching only the secular away from a moral/spiritual context. Parents of faith and religious leaders have reacted to this trend by assuming a greater role in the formal K—12 education of their children, either through home schooling or private schooling, and trying to gain leverage through fighting certain legal battles (Hillebrand, 2004). Often support for these parents and private schools has been provided by utilizing the benefits afforded by technology and instructional design models for remote learners.

## Competition and Quality of Education

Aside from any of the political or religious influences that might spurn distance-education efforts, many religious-affiliated educational institutions see the competitive advantage that online education provides. Cagney (1997) suggests that the theological schools that do not introduce online education will face the risk of not being able to keep up with those that do. The director of collegiate ministries for the United Church of Christ says that most of their colleges are using distance

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