

# Chapter XIV

## Social Structures of Online Religious Communities

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter examines interaction-oriented virtual religious communities online in the light of sociological theory of religious communities. The authors find that the particular importance of identity, authenticity and authority in religious communities populating online discussion forums may give rise to special problems online, which are demonstrated here to be direct outcomes of the necessary reliance on information technology to carry out functions of online religious social groups which are intended to correspond to offline religious categories. The authors draw upon both sociological theory of religious communities and information systems theory of computer-mediated communications to identify salient points of similarity and difference between online and offline religious social structures, and conclude that online religious forum communities as presently constituted are unlikely to be able to directly replicate the traditional social structures of the offline religious institutions from which they originated, due to the particular powers and constraints on action embodied in social software.*

### INTRODUCTION: RELIGION IN CYBERSPACE

The history of the Internet has repeatedly seen the transference, sometimes successful, sometimes less so, of categories and activities familiar from

the pre-Internet world, into cyberspace. Personal mail, for example, been widely adopted as an activity appropriate to the electronic realm; so has gaming, including not just cutting-edge 3D games like World of Warcraft, but also traditional board games such as chess or Scrabble. Online

personal auctions have transferred a market model familiar from the offline world of art houses and farm sales to cyberspace, with brilliant success. On the other hand, some models appear to transfer less transparently to the Internet realm. For example, while hard-copy magazines and newspapers in pre-Internet times successfully acquired subscribers willing to pay for content, subscription-based delivery for news content on the Internet has been marked by considerable difficulties in transferring the offline model to the online world—the technological channel through which information was delivered changed the user perception of the transaction taking place. Research has also determined that the technological conditions of computer-mediated communications, the potential for anonymity in particular, can affect human behavior online in ways which affect the usability of online social domains (Davis, 2002). In these latter cases, in which the offline paradigm does not necessarily translate in a straightforward manner to the online world, the potential is present for significantly increased understanding of the specific impacts and import of the information technologies themselves. This paper aims to examine such a case, contemporary attempts to employ offline formal religious categories of personal identity in online social contexts of computer-mediated communications conducted through forum software platforms. In order to understand this particular manifestation of religious activity online, we believe it is useful to examine the intersection of theories from two different disciplines: the sociology of religion, for an understanding of the foundations of religious community, and the information systems discipline, for an understanding of the constraints and powers of the technological components which provide for the possibility of computer-mediated communications. This paper will explore that intersection.

Modern religious life is increasingly taking place online (Pew Internet Research, 2004). More specifically, since the introduction of easy-to-use

social software for online text-based user interactions, commonly referred to as bulletin boards or forums, websites hosting persistent conversations specifically aimed at religious topics have appeared, in which adherents of various faiths can affirm their religious identity and participate in religious communities online. In the sections which follow, we will provide information and analysis of some of the issues associated with the virtual communities of users whose loci in cyberspace are the URL's of the websites hosting threaded discussions on religious topics through the use of forum software. Thus we are addressing the notion of user-to-user interactive "online religion" as opposed to "religion online", per the distinction proposed by Helland<sup>2</sup> (2000). Some of these fora are associated exclusively with specific formal religious institutions, while others are more or less open to the public on a broader range of beliefs associated generally with religious practice.

These online religious communities share characteristics with virtual communities generally:

- Shared interests – in this case, religious topics;
- Technology-mediated interactions – micro-computer-based, Internet/browser-based forum software;
- Guided by protocols and norms – emergent from the interaction of users with the technology (Porter, 2004)

Some important dimensions of difference between different religious forums include:

- Degree of association with specific religions/sects
- Formal/Informal nature of protocols and social norms
- Conditions for access to site or specific site areas
- Methods of administration

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