

Chapter 29

Authenticity in Online Religion: An Actor–Network Approach

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the subject of online religion and how it can be researched is discussed. The dynamics of religious experience, authority, communication and more is subject of much discussion both in academia and religious discourses primarily because of the seemingly immaterial realm that is cyberspace. This article examines unique aspects of the nature of online religion and pays particular attention to the fluidity of online/offline relations and the subject of “authenticity” in the realm of online religion. Following from that is the discussion of how actor-network theory (ANT), first developed by Bruno Latour, can be deployed as a useful methodological approach to researching online religion, and to navigate potentially deterministic and oppositional discourses of online/offline relations.

INTRODUCTION

In July 2013, CBC News published an article titled How Britain’s ‘Digital Nun’ is Turning the internet into a Sacred Space (CBC News, 2013). The article featured an English nun, Sister Catherine Wybourne, and her extensive use of the internet for religious purposes. According to the article, Sister Catherine has 10,600 followers on social networking site Twitter, and has communicated with people from over 120 countries through online retreats, online prayer and other religious services. She stated that “the days when people would just knock on a monastery door are – probably not quite past – but not quite so easy... and the internet is a kind of fourth wall with many windows.” She goes on to encourage other religious leaders to learn how to offer more online support, and to use the internet as a resource where leaders can “figure out what keeps people awake at night.”

The above is one of an increasing number of examples of how religious practice is being actively integrated with internet practices. Sister Catherine’s use of social media in an attempt to improve ease of access religious institutions is not new in its basic premise. More and more churches have websites, Facebook groups, and smartphone applications to provide regular updates to their members and visi-

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tors. Some churches, such as Lifechurch.tv, are streaming live services over multiple locations around the world. Others with no streaming capabilities upload recorded audio and video sermons. Outside the confines of the church institution, the Christian individual has also adopted new practices. They can now access Christian teachings from a variety of sources outside of their own “local” church, share their own views through blogs and/or social networking sites, or even form new global religious communities that are not part of any church organization.

The rise of online activity associated with religion serves as fertile ground for research. The genesis of this article lies from the curiosity of whether religious experiences can occur through online practices. Another way to ask this is: Does online religious practices have any effect on the particular user’s religious and spiritual identity and configuration? To become familiar with the topic, here are three hypothetical scenarios that highlight the complexities when discussing the experiential aspects of online religion. Firstly, if a person “chats” with a friend through an online platform such as Google Hangouts or Whatsapp and prays for the friend by typing the prayer out on screen, is it a valid prayer? Secondly, in the Christian context, if a person reads an online devotional, and participates in the Eucharist (or Holy Communion) by drinking wine/juice and eating a wafer in front of the computer screen, has he/she fulfilled Jesus’ instruction in the Bible of this sacred ritual? The third scenario involves a pilgrimage - If a person visits a 3D virtual environment of a shrine, or a holy place like the Mecca, can the person be considered as having completed the pilgrimage?

While this paper does not attempt to specifically resolve these questions, they nonetheless present certain concepts and complications when discussing “online” and “religion” within any research framework. What will be addressed at length in this paper are the two problems that clearly emerge from the scenarios itself. Firstly, the above questions and scenarios suggest a strict dichotomy between the online and the offline, that one context is entirely displaced from the other. Secondly, the underlying concern of all the above questions is that of authenticity. Can online religious practices and expressions be considered authentic, and can spiritual experiences, or transactions, take place in cyberspace?

IDENTIFYING THE INTERSECTIONS

To resolve the first problem, it is imperative to return to the root of any online activity – the user. If one has the aim of effectively conducting research that derives meaningful data and analyses of how the internet and religion are interrelated, one of the ideological challenges that need to be overcome is the presumption of a “hard” disconnect between the online and the offline. This does not necessarily refer to a person’s physical link to a device with internet capabilities, but rather, a disconnect of different realities. Instead, a more accurate perspective on the intricacies of any online/offline phenomena is that people are simultaneously online and offline (Tan, 2014), or at the very least “functionally intertwined” (Dunn & Redzuan, 2012). While this may seem like theoretical common sense, it is easy to take for granted the inseparable role of the human body in any cyberspace activity (Vasseleu, 1998, p. 46). In a metaphysical sense, when one is online, be it typing an email, playing a networked game, or conversing with another on a social media platform like Facebook, the physical body and the context which envelops it does not cease to exist, nor does it pause as if the progress of time and space revolved around the user. A person will still hunger, thirst, or experience a change of mood as a response to something happening in the offline setting. Furthermore, the user’s cultural context also continues to emerge in his/her expressions online.

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