



Chapter III

21st Century Religious Communities

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Abstract

This chapter examines the development of 21st century virtual communities, focusing upon those communities that have emerged for virtual religion. It aims to (1) raise awareness of the way that technology is being used for religious purposes; (2) explain the ways that human interaction in religious communities is influenced by technology, in both supporting traditional modes of interaction and in enabling new, and the main, criticisms; and (3) provide evidence to support the benefit of such communities to religious bodies themselves by turning to the question of technological determinism—and the crucial question of just how humanity is influenced by technology.

Introduction

The Internet has created new human communities linking people from geographically, socially, culturally, and otherwise disparate backgrounds. Virtual communities may

be defined as “a collection of people sharing common interests, ideas, and feelings over the Internet or other collaborative networks. Web-based virtual communities have been defined as social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace. These communities are becoming increasingly important forums for individuals and groups that share a professional interest or share common activities” (Dasgupta, 2006). In his book, *The Virtual Community*, Rheingold (1998) defines virtual communities as social aggregations that emerge from the Internet when enough people carry on public discussions long enough and with sufficient human feeling to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.

Virtual communities may be considered an outcome of the recent developments in communications technologies and a natural anthropological consequence for humanity embracing communications technology. While the original computer networks were never designed as a human communication medium, they have come to penetrate society for communication purposes in many ways—from mobile phones to Internet banking, hand-held computers to “intelligent” agents and voice-recognition at human-machine interfaces. The Internet has particularly brought people together from all over the world in various “online communities” and “virtual worlds” in the new “meeting place” of cyberspace. Virtual communities are found in every domain—in realms as diverse as education and health, recreation and science. One of the most important human realms in which virtual communities are found is that of religion.

First, we consider the nature of religion and note that a social and communal expression is vital; and we consider the ways that technology is being used for religious purposes. Second, we consider ways that technology both supports conventional practice and enables new expression, focusing upon Christianity. Third, we consider ways that religion benefits from virtual communities—in spite of some opposition.

Religion: Real and Virtual

Religion has proved very hard to define. Definitions of religion are often too narrow and exclude many of the belief systems which most people will agree are religious, or they are too vague and ambiguous, leading one to conclude that just about any and everything is actually a religion. Some of the more successful attempts identify a set of markers such as practical and ritual, experiential and emotional, narrative and mythical, doctrinal and philosophical, ethical and legal, social and institutional, and the material (Smart, 1992). The more markers present the more “religious-like” the belief system is. Sometimes religion is regarded as subjective, designating the

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