

Chapter 37

Cyber Behavior and Religious Practice on the Internet

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ABSTRACT

Cyber behavior and religious practices on the Internet have grown in popularity and acceptability over the past decade. Consequently, a number of religious traditions and individuals frequently use the Internet, while also negotiating between the offline and online world. The study of religious use of the Internet is contextualized within a number of phases and trends, which emerged as early as the 1980s and came to prominence in the 1990s with the study of religious rituals and behaviors online. Over the last fifteen years, the examination of religion online has moved from descriptive analysis toward more in-depth questioning as well as addressing some of the methodological challenges of studying religion online. The future direction and next phase in the study of religious cyber behavior includes targeting a number of areas yet to be analyzed thoroughly and in doing so, providing a more holistic understanding of cyber religious behavior.

INTRODUCTION

The internet emerged in 1969 predominantly for military and education purposes, yet by the 1980s as the technology became more user-friendly and available to the wider public, religious uses began to appear. Some of the earliest forms of religious engagement were online religious communities

such as net.religion on USENET, Ecunet (www.ecunet.org) and websites that included chat rooms or discussion lists such as BuddhaNet (www.buddhanet.net) and H-Judaic (www.h-net.org/~judaic/). Yet it was not until the 1990s that religious practice online became prominent on the internet landscape, with 1.7 million web pages with religious content found in the late 1990s and “ap-

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-0315-8.ch037

proximately 51 million pages on religion” by 2004 (Hojsgaard & Warburg, 2005, p.2). The quest for religion and spirituality within the online medium has significantly grown since the introduction of the internet, resulting in a growing interest in the academic study of religious cyber behavior.

Scholars have categorized and described the religious use of the internet in terms of a number of phases, starting in the mid-1990s, where focus was on how religious rituals and behaviors were being transferred and negotiated online. In the past fifteen years, this study has moved toward more in-depth questions of how perceptions and practices of ritual (Grieve, 2010), religious community (Cheong, 2008; Campbell, 2010), identity (Lovheim, 2004; Cowan, 2005) and authority (Campbell, 2010) are being influenced by, developed and maintained in online environments.

In order to understand the rise of religion online and the resulting religious cyber behaviors, this article’s three sections present an overview of how different religious traditions engage with the internet. The first section provides insight into the academic study of religion on the internet and identifies some significant collected works on this subject. The second section presents how cyber behavior and religious practice are lived out online by major world religions (i.e. Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism) and select new religious movements. This review will present a systematic discussion of the four key themes related to religious cyber behavior (i.e. ritual, community, authority, identity) and how they are expressed through various internet religious practices (i.e. discussion groups, blogs, chat rooms and online virtual worlds). This diversity of forms of religious engagement online is a testament to the growth and acceptance of the internet by many religious groups and individuals. Lastly, in the final section, future directions and questions related to our understanding of religious cyber behavior are outlined, acknowledging the need for continued examination of this fluid, still emerging environment that raises new questions about the influence of religion in the online environment.

1. THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND THE INTERNET

The academic study of religion on the internet has become an interdisciplinary endeavor, including scholars from the fields of religious studies, cultural studies, sociology, psychology, media studies and others. In the last ten years, there has been an increase in the number of researchers focusing attention on how the internet is being utilized for spiritual and religious practice. This focus and interdisciplinary approach is reflected in a growing scholarly discussion. Since 2000, three prominent collections have been published, indicating an increase in the potential implications and significance of religion on the internet.

Cowan & Hadden (2000), in the first edited collection, offer an interdisciplinary discussion on cyber religious practice and various methodological approaches. It is within this volume that Dawson argues that the study of religion online is still in its infancy (2000, p.49) and that there are three prominent research areas that need to be addressed, namely “identification and measurement,” a “systematic study of the key substantive concerns” and lastly, “theoretical and empirical exploration” (2000, p.26). Cowan & Hadden’s collection encapsulates the simplicity of this stage, as basic questions are asked and the challenges of methodological approaches are encountered as scholars focus on a purely descriptive analysis of what is happening online.

In the second collection, Dawson & Cowan (2004) address the social and cultural drivers of why religion is being practiced online. This collection tackles similar issues to the first but provides a more refined and developed approach that deviates from the previous descriptive account. The second collection raises a number of questions, including “how do we study religion online?” and “how are offline religious communities and identity affected by online religion?” Helland’s often cited demarcation between “religion-online” and “online-religion” positions itself within this second stage of studying religion on the internet (Helland, 2000).

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