1. *Introduction: Religion 2.0? Relational and Hybridizing Pathways in Religion, Social Media, and Culture*

Pauline Hope Cheong and Charles Ess

Religion 2.0?

"Religion 2.0" can be aptly introduced by the example of *Confession: A Roman Catholic App* for the iPhone and iPad (Little i Apps, 2011). For the relatively modest price of $1.99, *Confession* invites users to confess, and keep track of, their sins. As we will discuss in this chapter, it is enormously significant that *Confession* is *not* marketed as a complete and virtual replacement for a central rite in the Roman Catholic tradition. Rather, as the *Confession* description on iTunes carefully points out:

> The text of this app was developed in collaboration with Rev. Thomas G. Weinandy, OFM, Executive Director of the Secretariat for Doctrine and Pastoral Practices of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and Rev. Dan Scheidt, pastor of Queen of Peace Catholic Church in Mishawaka, IN. The app received an imprimatur from Bishop Kevin C. Rhodes of the Diocese of Fort Wayne—South Bend. It is the first known imprimatur to be given for an iPhone/iPad app. (ibid.)

In this way, *Confession* is careful to make explicit how far it is integrally interwoven with both the traditions and relevant authoritative hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. Moreover, *Confession* users are reminded that in order to receive absolution for their sins, they will still need to take the matter up with a real priest in a real church. *Confession* is hence clearly still rooted within the ancient practices and structures of the Roman Catholic Church, and, if anything, seeks to reinforce and enhance those structures and practices rather than call them into question, much less seek to overturn them.

Confession represents and exemplifies larger trends that emerge across the course of this volume on digital religion, new media, and culture. Here, we and our contributors examine how far "religion"—meaning, minimally, the individual and institutionalized practices, values, and beliefs that make up specific religious traditions—interacts with the multiple affordances and possibilities of computer-mediated communication, most especially those affiliated with Web 2.0. We understand these to include social media especially, such as social networking sites (Facebook), blogs and micro-blogs (Twitter), sites featuring user-generated content (YouTube and Wikipedia), and virtual worlds and online games (*Second Life* and *World of Warcraft*). Most broadly, *contrary* to 1990s' theory and rhetoric that emphasized radical distinctions between the (online) virtual and the (offline) real—so that, for example, some might argue that a virtual church or a virtual practice such as *Confession* could fully *replace* their offline, real-world counterparts and connection points—Religion 2.0 by and large represents an amalgamation and assemblage of real- and virtual-world practices. To be sure—and in keeping with much of the hype surrounding Web 2.0 as ostensibly ushering in a new age of radical individualism and thereby greater freedom, equality, and democracy— the affordances and practices of Web 2.0 media in many ways profoundly challenge more traditional structures, norms, and practices. At the same time, however, these challenges—with few but notable exceptions—issue less in radical revolution, and more in transformation and reconfiguration of existing practices, beliefs, and infrastructures. These findings, moreover, are consistent with similar patterns noted in the broader fields of new media and intercultural communication (Cheong, Martin, & Macfadyen, 2012) and Internet Studies (Ess & Consalvo, 2011). So it is, then, that *Confession* seeks to complement and amplify, but ultimately reinforce—not replace—an ancient religious practice.

To see how this is so, we begin with a brief note on the origins of this volume, as an entrée into the larger conceptual matters and issues that constitute the frameworks of the volume. We will then briefly introduce the chapters themselves, as organized into three sections: "Theorizing Digital Religion," "Empirical Investigations," and "Historical and Theological Examinations." Following this, we will explicate three major themes that cut across the organizational boundaries of the sections, namely, *identity*, *community*, and *authority*. Specifically, we articulate a dialectical perspective in digital religion and culture, by identifying central tensions and highlighting multiple interdependent links that are characteristic of what Schement and Stephenson (1996) noted as "unavoidable frictions" and "endemic tensions" in mediated religious practice. We will explore how specific chapters contribute to these relational and hybridizing dynamics with the three major themes, as part of our developing a broader understanding of Religion 2.0.

Origins

Our volume has its beginnings at the Church and Mission in a Multireligious Third Millennium conference, held at Aarhus University, Denmark (January 27–29, 2010). The co-editors of this book collaborated on the organization and presentation of a paper session and a panel, entitled *Church in Cyberspace* and *Church and Social Media,* respectively, in which we emphasized attention—theoretical, theological, and empirical—to social media and religion in particular. Inspired by both Knut Lundby's keynote for the conference— included here in revised form—as well as by our initial findings as collected in the panel presentations, we thought it might be time for an anthology focusing on what we now call Religion 2.0, i.e., the manifold interactions between, on the one hand, diverse expressions and institutions affiliated with religious traditions and practices around the globe, and, on the other, the equally diverse and rapidly changing affordances and possibilities of Web 2.0. Our thoughts on the timeliness of such an anthology were reinforced by the fact that it has now been over seven years since the appearance of a major volume dedicated to religion and CMC (Computer Mediated Communication). Happily, Mary Savigar and Steve Jones at Peter Lang agreed that a collection on Religion 2.0 would be worth pursuing as part of their Digital Formations series. And so, in addition to encouraging panel contributors to develop their presentations into suitable chapters, we issued an open call for papers and also invited key figures in the field of religion and CMC to participate. Very happily, the result is what we like to think of as a symbiosis between younger and more seasoned scholars and researchers.

The first section, "Theorizing Digital Religion," begins with a revised version of Knut Lundby's keynote speech, *Dreams of Church in Cyberspace*. Lundby took up a media sociological perspective, one that focused more closely on the *content* of messages rather than their medium. Lundby was thereby able to critique more enthusiastic claims for cyberspace, virtual communities, etc., in ways that are directly relevant to the Church's interest in mission.

Bernie Hogan and Barry Wellman echo and reinforce Lundby's critiques by way of a larger historical overview of Internet Studies. As the title suggests, "The Immanent Internet Redux" argues against 1990s' claims of a radical divorce between the real and the virtual, the offline and the online—a divorce that would otherwise issue a "transcendent Internet." While instances of such a divorce can be found, the prevailing trends are in the opposite direction—again, as our opening example of *Confession* suggests—towards complementary relationships and resonance between offline and online.

Pushing beyond familiar notions of Web 2.0, Bala A. Musa and Ibrahim M. Ahmadu seek to build a more complex and holistic model of contemporary communication. Their "New Media, Wikifaith and Church Brandversation"

focuses specifically on "Wikifaith" as "people-centered, people-cultivated," vis-à-vis specific processes of "brandversation," i.e., the diverse processes that shape specific churches and their sense of identity, as they perceive the need to establish themselves as brands in a market-oriented, pluralistic society. One of their central questions is how far the church can learn to sell itself in this new environment—but without selling out entirely and becoming simply another commodity shaped entirely by the casual needs and interests of "prosumers" (p. 75). It is worth noting here that Peter Fischer-Nielsen and Stefan Gelfgren highlight precisely this theme of ever-growing commercialization as a major point of concern and research in their concluding chapter.

In her "How Religious Communities Negotiate New Media Religiously," Heidi Campbell raises these and related core issues concerning how religious institutions—and individuals—can retain something of their traditions and identities in contemporary (and, as Musa and Ahmadu remind us, increasingly commercialized and commercializing) communication environments. Rather than addressing these questions head on, Campbell instead gives us an account of her "religious-social shaping of technology" theory, a framework developed to illuminate the complex interactions between religious communities and new communication technologies. These foundations thereby reinforce—now at a theoretical level—our broader theme of how far online religion is shaped by its offline points of origin and return.

Jørgen Straarup takes up some of the most intriguing possibilities of new media and Web 2.0—what he calls "avatar religion." His analysis in "When Pinocchio Goes to Church: Exploring an Avatar Religion" suggests that despite the revolutionary potential of new media, even avatars seek community—community that appears to require precisely the (sometimes very) traditional, real-world communities and practices that serve as the origins and destinations of their virtual counterparts.

As its title "Empirical Investigations," suggests, chapters in the second section intend to balance and complement our theoretical beginnings with what can be known empirically about contemporary practices and patterns. So, we begin with Peter Fischer-Nielsen, whose "Pastors on the Internet: Online Responses to Secularization" summarizes his extensive analysis of how Danish pastors respond to the communicative possibilities of Web 2.0. Fischer-Nielsen's research highlights three possible strategies for responding to the challenges new media and Web 2.0 bring in their wake—most bluntly, in terms of a threat of secularization (a threat already felt strongly in highly secular Denmark, where only ca. 4% of the population attend a church on a regular basis).

Contra the tendencies, even today, to hype new media as *new* and thereby *revolutionary*, Lorenzo Cantoni and his colleagues approach the appropriation of new media by the Roman Catholic Church as a "normal stage" in the

development of the Church's activities. Their study, utilizing an international survey, is distinctive, as they interrogate precisely the primary representatives of the church hierarchy—namely, priests and bishops—regarding their understandings of, and responses to, new media. Their quantitative analysis thereby nicely complements the more external analysis of Catholic media usage provided by Campbell.

In "Voting 'Present': Religious Organization Groups on Facebook," Mark D. Johns examines how individuals interact with Facebook groups initiated by diverse religious organizations. Contrary to the hopes of some—i.e., that the more interactive media of Web 2.0 might "empower" individuals to shape, and participate more extensively in, the lives of institutions, including congregations—Johns finds instead that those who join such groups usually just stop there. That is, their action amounts to little more than hitting the "join" or "like" button in Facebook; no further engagement follows. While these actions are of symbolic significance, as they mark and index individuals' religious identity, Johns' findings also serve as a reality check for those institutions that hope that if they make themselves apparent online via such groups, more engagement with their real-world communities will follow.

In their case study, Stine Lomborg and Charles Ess reinforce and complement Johns' findings. The title of their chapter, "'Keeping the Line Open and Warm': An Activist Danish Church and Its Presence on Facebook," quotes a young pastor who deftly uses the social networking site to maintain and refresh extant relationships with congregants. But, as we will discuss more fully below, church leaders and congregants have responded to the various ways that such media may challenge traditional authority and hierarchies with a renegotiation process that takes on board some of the affordances of the new media, but only insofar as these complement and reinforce the real-world community.

Pauline Hope Cheong's "Twitter of Faith: Understanding Social Media Networking and Microblogging Rituals as Religious Practices" focuses on how believers seek to appropriate and exploit micro-blogs such as Twitter for a variety of community-building purposes, including evangelism, mediation, and prayer. Echoing the thematic of "church as brand," Cheong finds that blogging practices contribute to the construction of "faith brands," as such practices encourage both loyalty to church leadership as well as church growth through evangelism. The chapter also discusses some of the potential advantages of microblogging as a religious practice, as well as its more shady side, and suggests multiple areas for future research.

The last chapter in this section, by Tim Hutchings, represents one of the most extensive investigations into online churches through participant-observation methodology that we know of. His "Creating Church Online:

Networks and Collectives in Contemporary Christianity" begins with a solid historical overview of research in these domains, and then turns to close inquiry into five of the best-known examples of online church. Echoing many of the chapters in this volume, as well as, as we have begun to see, larger trends in Internet Studies over the past decade or so, Hutchings finds that "These online groups may be viewed as communities, but also as components in wider collectives of digital and local religious activity, and as connections in the self-constructed religious networks of their visitors" (p. 221).

Our third and last section, "Historical and Theological Examinations," broadens our attention out to the longer histories of media and religion, and to careful efforts to examine both historical and contemporary interactions between religion and media in theological terms. We open with Stefan Gelfgren's "'Let There Be Digital Networks and God Will Provide Growth?' Comparing Aims and Hopes of 19th-Century and Post-Millennial Christianity." Gelfgren's comparison between expectations, hopes—and fears—surrounding the introduction of new media in the 19th century (e.g., printed tracts) and those familiar from more recent times, as inspired by the emergence of social media, is a salutary counter to early claims about the latter as, for example, perhaps the most revolutionary event since the invention of fire (John Perry Barlow, 1996). Gelfgren further expands on the attention we've seen paid to how churches are goaded to negotiate new media use within a highly commercialized, consumer-driven marketplace that demands branding and competition (Musa & Ibrahim; Cheong).

Peter Horsfield's "'A Moderate Diversity of Books?' The Challenge of New Media to the Practice of Christian Theology" turns us directly towards theology. Horsfield uses the now well-known framework of communication theory that we have drawn on from the outset—as developed by the likes of McLuhan, Innis, and Eisenstein, and especially Walter Ong—so as to approach human cultural history in terms of four primary communication technologies, namely *orality*, *literacy*, and *print*, and then the *secondary orality* of electric media (cf. Ess, 2010). Horsfield draws a picture of how Christian theology is transformed in foundational ways as theology itself begins in the oral culture of the earliest Christian message, and then makes its way through the succeeding shifts. Connecting his account focusing on theology, and the broader account we develop here, would indeed be a most useful and interesting exercise for the reader.

Sam Han helpfully takes up a different media theory—that of Friedrich Kittler—vis-à-vis the specific Christian notion of human beings as *imago Dei,* the image of God. Focusing specifically on the computer as the site for developing and extending artificial intelligence, Han argues that the upshot will be an "immanentization" of the *imago Dei*.

Lynne Baab concludes this section with theological attention to the three specific topoi identified in her title, "Toward a Theology of the Internet: Place, Relationship, and Sin." In particular, her observation that the individualism otherwise hyped as an unalloyed good in the rhetoric surrounding Web 2.0 (as well as Web 1.0) intersects with traditional theological concerns about sin—e.g., addictive, and other, destructive behaviors potentially facilitated through the affordances of Web 2.0 as the medium of the networked *individual*—is a sobering counterpoint that helps deflate such hype with a more critical view. At the same time, Baab's discussion provides us with yet one more instance of how new media fosters at least certain kinds of individualism that directly challenge more traditional claims of religious institutions.

The concluding chapter by Peter Fischer-Nielsen and Stefan Gelfgren takes up the work collected in this volume as both grounds and springboard for six trajectories of future research. Among these is the thematic concern with how the increasingly commercialized environments of Web 2.0 interact with our expectations and uses of new media. Such concerns, we can note, are not limited to frameworks, values, and practices shaped solely by religious institutions and traditions. Rather, several noted researchers in the broader fields of Internet Studies have raised similar concerns in recent years—most notably, perhaps, as Sonja Livingstone puts it, with regard to how our increasing engagements in proprietary SNSs and other new media environments leads not simply to our giving away our data for the sake of commercial interests, but, more fundamentally, to our collaborating in processes of *commodifying* ourselves and our identities according to the prevailing market categories and tastes that "sell" (Livingstone, 2011, p. 354; cf. Baym, 2011, pp. 399f.; van Dijck, 2010). Such commodification would seem to warrant the attention and concern of both the secular and religious alike. In addition, Fischer-Nielsen and Gelfgren highlight several other developments that inspire further research, such as the rise of ever more mobile and personalized digital media, which provide more sophisticated and interactive infrastructures, and the globalization of digital religion.

Religion in the Age of Web 2.0—An Initial Survey

As an initial effort to develop a larger understanding of what the work collected here may suggest more broadly regarding Religion 2.0, we begin with a provisional understanding of Web 2.0. We take this rubric as intending to denote a qualitative jump (from Web 1.0, ca. 1992–2005) to new levels of interactivity and individual expression, and the emergence of the hybrid producer-consumer or "produser" (Bruns, 2008) as facilitated by a range of

technological advances (such as ever-increasing and ever more widely available bandwidth and mobility of computational devices, most notably Internet-enabled mobile phones and tablets), ongoing developments in new/digital media (including the convergence of digital photo- and video-cameras in said mobile phones), and in computer-mediated communication itself. The latter typically include sites that feature, and ostensibly foster, user-generated content in diverse forms, such as YouTube; social networking sites (SNS); blogs and micro-blogs, such as Twitter, that invite ongoing, potentially instantaneous interaction between posters; new arrays of virtual worlds such as Second Life and Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) such as World of Warcraft; and a bewildering and ever-growing array of variations on these, ranging from "citizen journalism" as interwoven with more traditional news formats (and their still well-known corporations), to the use of social media in so-called "soft revolutions" (and some not so soft revolutions, as are currently being battled in the Middle East), and everything in between (e.g., sites and interactive venues dedicated to specific interests and hobbies, ranging from knitting to music to child pornography to racist hate groups). Along the way, our smartphones use GPS technology not only to connect efficiently to our mobile networks for the sake of an SMS or even a phone call, but also—whether voluntarily (as in Foursquare, or Google's Latitude) or involuntarily (as in Apple's recently unveiled practice of collecting our locations in a hidden file, ostensibly for the purposes of greater efficiency)—to constantly update our physical location.

All of this is made even more complicated by the rapid growth and diffusion of the internet and the web world-wide. At the time of writing, nearly two billion people or ca. 29% of the world's population now enjoy some form of internet access (Internet World Stats, 2011). In the face of the harsh realities of our contemporary world—often brought to us with unedited immediacy and clarity precisely by mobile phones recording history in the making—the 1990s' utopian language of "an electronic global village" is heard less frequently. Rather, the global diffusion of these new media has made cross-cultural encounters all but inevitable—and, as the Mohammed Cartoon Crisis of 2006 demonstrates (Ess, 2009), not all of these encounters are peaceful and salutary.

In sum, in the age of Web 2.0 we are "always on" (Baron, 2008) and interconnected globally and cross-culturally. And in the midst of all of this—again, as the 2006 Cartoon Crises exemplifies—"religion" (another difficult and contested term) is often deeply at work and in play. In particular, specific characteristics of Web 2.0 technologies are lifted up as affordances that will surely challenge traditional institutions—including religious institutions. Most centrally: to begin with, the *interactivity* of Web 2.0 applications—the capacity of ordinary users to respond to, and indeed create, new media

expressions on their own—is often claimed to lead us in the direction of greater freedom of expression and equality, and thereby greater democracy. This means, in particular, that tensions emerge as these affordances, insofar as they are realized, challenge traditional forms of authority as top-down and hierarchical.

These claims in turn lead to central thematic questions in the latest phase of research on religion online, such as, as the use of CMC becomes increasingly de rigueur, and an expected, if not major, component of how religious institutions communicate with congregants—most especially young people—will not the various forms of *identity, community,* and *authority* necessarily be called into radical question? The 15 chapters in our book formulate such questions from a variety of theoretical, historical, and theological contexts, and provide empirical investigations in a variety of specific ways. Collectively, these chapters contribute stimulating insights into the dialectics of digital religion as they intertwine with emergent tensions in the contested areas of individual and relational identity, community networks, and authority performances and paradoxes.

Identity: Individual, Ephemeral and Relational Selves

It is often claimed that functionalities highlighted under Web 2.0 apparently foster greater interactivity, equality, and democracy. But it is worth reconsidering how these functionalities in turn rest upon—and perhaps influence foundational transformations in—our sense of *self,* or identity.

To be sure, these claims for Web 2.0 are familiar to those of us who remember the rhetoric and debate of the 1990s (Ess, 2011; Wellman, 2011, pp. 17–20). And so, with the beginnings of what Wellman identified as the "third age" of Internet Studies (ibid., 21f.), we find the initial suggestions of how our interactions with CMC technologies were issuing in new conceptions of self and identity. Captured in notions of "networked individualism"—findings from Castells (2001) and Wellman (2001), as highlighted by Knut Lundby in his opening chapter here—and in what Wellman and Haythornthwaite identified as "the networked individual" (2002), these notions represent something of an amalgam between modernist notions of the individual self (especially as affiliated with *literacy* and *print* as media technologies), and postmodern notions of multiple, fluid, but also ephemeral selves, with the latter, especially, documented in the work of Sherry Turkle (1984, 1995, 2010) and often argued to be fostered by CMC venues, beginning with the MUDs and MOOs whose denizens Turkle closely studied.

As Lundby points out, such individualism, however moderated and/or amplified by ever increasing networked interactivity, facilitates direct challenges to traditional religious institutions—certainly, within the

Christian traditions, those of the Roman Catholic Church. Even Protestant churches—historically, those built on giving the individual "greater voice," as Lundby puts it—"are definitely being challenged." The upshot, as Lundby points out succinctly, is that "Churches as institutions are in trouble" (this volume, p. 36).

At the same time, however, several studies in this volume also highlight both individual and institutional *resistance* in various forms to these challenges—as we will see below, when we turn to the theme of *authority*. Here, however, we can point out, to begin with, that in their study of a progressive Danish Lutheran church, Lomborg and Ess document both a strong individual and institutional commitment to the traditional Protestant values of equality and individualism. In part, it was this commitment that encouraged the church's ministers and some enthusiastic laity to pursue the development of a Facebook page. Yet both ministers and at least one informant made clear that they also wanted to preserve a good deal of the traditional hierarchy and boundary between the ministers, as professionals and authorities representing the institutions and roles of the traditional church, and congregants. In light of the question of *identity* in Religion 2.0, this would suggest that whatever the affordances of Web 2.0, at least some of its users wish to maintain something of the traditional boundaries and structures of the church—boundaries that appear to delimit the authority of the individual as a member of a religious community and institution.

On the one hand, these findings are in keeping with other research and analyses that suggest that the shifts we appear to be witnessing towards more relational or networked selves—shifts that are fostered precisely by networked technologies, and most especially several of the venues characteristic of Web 2.0, such as SNSs, micro-blogs, and virtual worlds (Cheong & Gray, 2011; Ess, 2010; Gergen, 2011)—are nonetheless neither inexorable nor unlimited. That is, such shifts towards more networked or relational selves do *not* automatically mean (as they did for some 1990s pundits) the end of the modernist conception of the individual (Rodogno, 2011). Rather, what may be emerging is some sort of hybrid notion of identity, one that conjoins a modernist understanding that emphasizes individual rationality and autonomy with a "post-post-modernist" understanding that emphasizes relationality, multiplicity, affect, and ephemerality. And, as we have indicated from the outset, such a hybrid self would be in keeping with the larger patterns discerned over the past decade (and more) in Internet Studies. That is, as Klaus Bruhn Jensen concisely notes, "Old media rarely die, and humans remain the reference point and prototype for technologically mediated communication" (2011, p. 44). And thereby, insofar as our use of diverse media technologies can be correlated with distinctive notions of selves—i.e., a modernist notion of the rational individual as affiliated with the technologies of *literacy* and

print, vis-à-vis a post(post)modernist notion of the self as fluid, multiple, and ephemeral, as affiliated with what Walter Ong characterized as the "secondary orality" of "electric media" (meaning: radio, movies, TV, and, at least to some degree, CMC)—our learning to conjoin literacy and print with secondary orality would correlate with just such a hybrid self (Ess, 2010).

On the other hand, as Baab's analysis suggests, one of the key questions to emerge here is what *kind* of individualism is fostered in Web 2.0? At the risk of oversimplification—but reflecting central dialectical tensions in the emergence of the modern self (cf. Taylor, 1989, pp. 495–521)—we can distinguish between two emphases of individualism, namely, a more rationally oriented autonomy vis-à-vis a more emotive (and, perhaps, more relational) individualism. The more rationally oriented, autonomous individual is highlighted in modernity, both in affiliation with modern conceptions of democratic-liberal regimes, and in Protestant and Catholic traditions that have been deeply influenced by the critical rationalism of modern Enlightenment. Such individuals, finally, seem to depend upon the technologies of literacy and print—including writing, which was described by the late Foucault as a "technology of the self" (Bakardjieva & Gaden, in press). By contrast, as the secondary orality of electric media and CMC brings about a return of a more complete human sensorium—including sight and sound—it is thereby able to powerfully appeal to our emotions in ways that are more difficult for texts (Turkle, 2010).

Indeed, Cheong (2010) discusses how microblogging rituals may create a new textual and visual sensorium by restructuring wired believers' consciousness, and generating a heightened awareness of relationship between the I, You, and the Thou, which opens up possibilities for revitalised religiosity to counteract claims of secularisation in technologically advanced and developed countries. In this light, it may not be accidental that those Protestant traditions that emphasize emotive experiences—e.g., of being "born again"—are characteristically among the early adopters and adapters of electric media and CMC technologies, in contrast with the comparatively conservative approaches to these media in the more rationally oriented Protestant and Catholic traditions (cf. Bernice Martin, 1998, 2001, cited in Straarup, this volume, p. 106). Insofar as these correlations hold, then, a key question for religious communities is, what *kind* of individuals and individualism do we wish (or need) to foster, and how do we use both traditional and new media to do so?

More broadly, however, the internet and the web have been with us for less than 20 years. It is by no means clear whether resistances such as those we see documented here indicate long-term trends, or simply suggest generational differences that will pass as the older generations take their leave of this good Earth—and with them, older, more modernist notions of the individual may also pass away.

Community: Networked Individualism, Sociality and Collectivism

Of course, as the (re)emergence of the networked and relational self in conjunction with the emergence of networked media emphasizes, our notions of self and identity are inextricably interwoven with our basic understandings and assumptions regarding how such selves may and/or must relate to larger communities. These interrelationships begin with human communities, ranging from the family, through national communities, to humanity at large. At the same time, religious traditions and frameworks stress how such communities and relationships further include, one way or another, the natural order and the sacred (whether as *transcendent*, as is stressed in most versions of the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, or *immanent*, as is thematic of many Confucian, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions, for example). Very clearly, digital media facilitate and mediate social relations, including peoples' notions of relationship, patterns of belonging, and community—and in doing so, digital media thus immediately intersect with, and significantly impact, central religious concerns with (re)establishing right relationship or harmony in these various communities. Hence, several contributions within this book analyze the culture, connection, and activity emerging within particular online groups, as well as their role within wider religious networks and fields of activity.

So, to begin with, online churches have been historically studied as classic examples of "virtual communities," constituted as such by stable patterns of social meanings and personal relationships and largely self-contained as bounded groups with distinctive cultures. Equally historically, however, much of the rhetoric (if not simply hype) surrounding such virtual communities in the 1990s, celebrating how such communities would replace their real-world counterparts, has now been toned down. Empirical findings towards the end of the 1990s to the present have documented how far such virtual religious communities were intertwined with their offline communities (Cheong, Poon, Huang, & Casas, 2009; Ess, 2011). As part of these developments, the emergence of conceptions of the networked individual thereby highlighted both online and offline connections with larger communities.

In particular, Jørgen Straarup points out in this volume that even avatars seem to prefer community as rooted in real-world locations and practices. At the same time, as Knut Lundby suggests, our drive for community connections rests in part on a (somewhat Romantic) conception of *Gemeinschaft*, as defined by Tönnies ([1957] 1988; Lundby, this volume, p. 30). In this sense, another central tension thus emerges between the networked individual who—as Hogan and Wellman point out here—emerges as the portal seeking to control information flows and connections, and the communities of diverse relationships (often initially analyzed in terms of the contrast between

weak-tie and strong-tie relationships) that such individuals thereby interconnect with. Hogan and Wellman's analysis of survey data over the past decade prompts the question: what are the implications of networked individualism for the definition and enactment of religious communities?

Tim Hutchings provides some initial insight as he documents several examples which indicate "the presence of a fluid, loosely networked sphere of Christian activity in Second Life, within which individuals circulate freely to find the people, places, and activities that appeal to them" (this volume, p. 218). Hutchings compares these circulation patterns with those described by Nancy Baym (2007) in terms of a "networked collectivism" in music fandom. As Baym (2007) put it, a form of digital sociality emerges here that lies "between the site-based online group and the egocentric network, distributing themselves throughout a variety of sites in a quasi-coherent networked fashion . . . members move amongst a complex ecosystem of sites, building connections amongst themselves and their sites as they do." For Hutchings, this pattern "applies easily to the Christian population of Second Life," as "a kind of 'networked religious collective' that incorporates a wide array of often short-lived locations" (this volume, p. 218).

The ephemerality of such online relationships, as apparently disconnected from offline, real-world communities (religious or otherwise), resonates with a second phenomenon described by Mark D. Johns in his wide-ranging exploration of religious groups on Facebook—or more specifically, global groups on Facebook registered in the category of "religious organizations." Members were observed to join such groups as a way of voting affirmation for the group, its goals, and/or its creator, but almost no interaction took place within the groups. The research suggests that joining a Facebook group is a symbolic act for the purpose of declaring a religious identity for the user to those outside the group. Implications for faith groups include a warning that use of social networks also needs to focus on building relationships, not merely on building large lists of fans or followers. Yet the observation here about little interaction also raises a larger question about the nature of online religious collectives: in what ways and from what vantage points do we characterize the evolving nature of religious community, from the locus of Facebook group pages and/or individual Facebook pages?

A third insight offered here is found in Cheong's (2010) examination of the relatively recent phenomenon of religious microblogging. Cheong examines the ways in which Twitter is appropriated by faith users to develop innovative and interactive forms of evangelization, prayer, and meditation, and discusses the implications of these new sociotechnical practices, termed here as "microblogging rituals," for religious community building. Specifically, Cheong argues that the creation and circulation of microblogging rituals,

including "faith memes," functions to constitute and fuel the stream of lived sacred experiences, thereby ideologically connecting Twitter believers. Moreover, microblogging rituals facilitate the promotion of organized religion, as churches construct distinctive "faith brands" to publicize their mission and encourage loyalty to church leadership, and church growth.

In this way, Cheong's (2010) findings reinforce our opening examination of *Confession* as an example of contemporary media that is rooted in, and seeks to reinforce, real-world traditions and practices, not to replace them. These examples in turn stand in tension with the countervailing patterns highlighted by Hutchings and Johns that emphasize the ephemerality of online collectives and groups that are not otherwise rooted in real-world, offline communities. As with our initial findings concerning self and identity, the only thing we can say with assurance, as based on these investigations and insights, is that our notions of self, identity, and thereby interactions are not settled. Rather, we seem to see patterns of online interaction and media use that fit both a more (postmodern) sense of self, and thereby community, as multiple, fluid, ephemeral, and emotive, as well as a hybrid sense of self and community that encompasses both more modernist and traditional conceptions in (more or less) comfortable alliance with more postmodernist and contemporary conceptions and behaviors. In other words, the central dialectic between the freedom of the networked individual to engage in multiple but short-lived engagements online, vis-à-vis our clear interest to thereby *connect* with others in community, including in more stable, geographically located, and defined offline communities, is a tension still fully open, allowing and requiring further exploration.

We see this same tension, finally, in terms of our third and last theme.

Authority: Communicative Performances and Paradoxes

Religious authority can be understood and studied as a quality of communication, which in an electronic era, may be media-derived, discursively constructed, and dynamically constituted across digital media (Cheong, Huang, & Poon, 2011). A review by Cheong (in press) on studies exploring the relationships between the Internet and religious authority highlights that early studies in religion online conceptualized the Internet as a distinct and convivial space for spiritual interaction, and, as such, new flows of religious information and knowledge posed corrosive effects on the influence and jurisdiction of traditional religious authorities. The dominant logic associates offline religious authority with more static models of legitimation, and views the internet as promoting informational diversity and social fractures that are disruptive to the status quo. In lieu of traditional authorities, and within virtual communities, newer forms of web-based religious authorities such as web masters and

forum moderators were proposed. Yet a more recent and alternative perspective is stimulated by the growing recognition of situating religious authority among older media and faith infrastructures. The internet may have, to some extent, facilitated changes in the personal and organizational basis by which religious leaders operate, but strategic practices by some clergy, including their engagement with digital and other forms of media, enable them to regain the legitimacy and trust necessary to operate in the religious ken.

Several of our chapters contribute to these contemporary themes and threads of authority research specifically, as they document how religious leaders are actively harnessing and appropriating new and social media for their individual cultivation and organizational practices. At the same time, in part just as new and social media challenge—as promised—traditional hierarchies and patterns of authority, religious leaders are caught up in an often complex and dynamic process of re-negotiating the authority they now seek to exercise in online, as well as offline, spheres, including possibly new institutional structures.

Here, some findings are in fact consistent with claims regarding Web 2.0, i.e., more of its interactive, ostensibly democratizing, features are made use of by comparatively less-hierarchical traditions, while more hierarchical traditions are better at resisting those democratizing features precisely in an effort to preserve traditional institutional structures of authority. As an example in this volume, Heidi Campbell documents here (building on her earlier work, including her analysis of "the Kosher cellphone" as developed for use within Ultra-orthodox Jewish communities: 2010, pp. 179–193) how more conservative religious traditions—specifically, the Roman Catholic Church—while embracing new media up to a certain point, at the same time seek to set clear boundaries on such media use so as to preserve foundational values, practices, and beliefs that would otherwise potentially be brought into question. So Campbell describes how the Catholic Church has shaped its uses of web-based communication technologies in line with the Church's formal hierarchy and clerical caste led by the Pope. On the one hand, yes, the Vatican website will generate automated email responses on the Pope's behalf. On the other hand, Vatican officials either disabled or removed such hallmark Web 2.0 features as the ranking function and comment mode on the Vatican YouTube channel, in order to preserve the Vatican's image and control of new media. More broadly, the Vatican site has historically functioned mostly as a massive text archive, one that thereby follows a "top-down," one-to-many broadcasting model. This usage highlights, perhaps not accidentally, the capacity of the web to serve as a text archive for the important documents of the Church, and thereby how far CMC remains close to the modernist conjunction of *literacy* and *print*. Such usage contrasts with the more fluid, if ephemeral (and emotive), "secondary

orality" highlighted by Ong as characteristic of electric media and, up to a point at least, the more interactive dimensions of Web 2.0 as we have seen exemplified in changing, perhaps hybridizing, notions of self, identity, and community.

Indeed, as Campbell further points out, these more conservative uses of the Internet and the Web contrast with what we might characterize as more aggressive uses among, especially, Evangelical communities,[1] including SNSs, micro-blogs such as Twitter, etc., as these make greater use of interactive features. And betwixt and between these diverse institutional and denominational trends and patterns, more recent scholarship has proposed redefinitions of the constitutions and practices of religious authority to account for fresh ways in which it is flourishing in increasingly integrated new and social media platforms.

In our volume, Peter Horsfield documents one of the major directions or trends of Web 2.0, namely, that the "distributed and decentralized patterns of new media communication have increased the potential for a diversity of voices rather than an authorized few to project themselves and their opinions into the marketplace." Consequently, "the previously recognized criteria of religious authority, such as formal qualifications or institutional position, are changing to more fluid characteristics applied by audiences, such as a person's charisma, accessibility, and perceived cultural competence" (this volume, p. 225). In this sense, there appear to be temporal changes in the modes of authority production as some religious leaders expand the scope of their calling and restructure their roles to use social media such as Twitter to extend their outreach and influence (Cheong, 2011). Other contributors here likewise highlight how religious institutions and authority figures manage to both take up new communication possibilities while simultaneously retaining much of their earlier authority and status.

As a first example, Peter Fischer-Nielsen shows how far Google, Facebook, and YouTube have been integrated into the working lives of pastors. In an analysis of results from a survey completed by 1040 pastors of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark, he found that 95% of the pastors are online daily, and a significant proportion (94% of the pastors aged between 25 and 39 years) regard the Internet as having a positive influence on their work. But this is in part, it would seem, insofar as these new media work to complement and reinforce traditional practices, rather than challenge or overturn them. So: two-thirds of the respondents reported that the Internet had "caused more frequent contact with parishioners," and most endorsed "flesh and blood" "real church practice" in lieu of cyberchurch rituals and Web-based services (this volume, p. 127). The creators of *Confession* would be pleased.

Indeed, Cheong, Huang, and Poon (2011) have documented some of the complex processes that follow on churches taking up Web 2.0 media that initially facilitate challenges to traditional hierarchies and conceptions of authority. Significantly, their investigations highlight dialectical tensions in authority related to the countervailing tendencies in digital media negotiations. While online knowledge sources can provide laity with alternative resources that may encourage them to question their ministers' claims, beliefs, etc., these same sources also serve as a source of education that enhances a priest's epistemic authority, as the latter is able to move beyond dictating, to mediating between texts, i.e., Scripture as interpreted by the priest or minister, and alternative interpretations gleaned from Internet sources. In other words, "a paradox of epistemic authority is that it may be more effective when followers possess some level of knowledge that enables them to evaluate the legitimacy of clergy's knowledge" (2011, p. 1163). In still broader terms, these findings can be seen to suggest a hybridization of *literacy-print*, on the one hand, and secondary orality of electric media on the other hand. That is, in these re-negotiations of authority, a minister's knowledge of the Bible—the premier artifact of the printing revolution and, as increasingly available through print in standardized form to ever more readers, a main driver of the Protestant Reformation—at least on occasion still serves as a "stopper" vis-à-vis competing claims or views drawn from electronic (and thus more multiple but also more fluid) epistemic sources.

A last chapter from our volume also makes this point, in the Danish context. Stine Lomborg and Charles Ess note in their case study of an activist Danish church how the presence of the church on Facebook was praised in terms of its "brand value," signaling that the church is "progressive" (and thereby instantiates the "brandversation" described here by Musa and Ibrahim). But even as Facebook friendships may be relationally rewarding for leaders seeking to build closer relationships with their members, these leaders also highlighted tensions in the negotiation of authority; it is "a delicate balance to strike as this strategic presentation of the pastor as an ordinary person also possibly entails a risk of jeopardizing the professional respect and authority so important for a pastor in his work and leadership within the community" (this volume, p. 178). And so it is that the church leaders have come to recognize how far they can go in terms of blurring the boundary between clergy and laity via Facebook and other forms of electronic communication—and how far they must reinforce traditional roles and relationships, e.g., in part through continued use of traditional, print-based media in worship, beginning precisely with standard Bible readings and hymns as sung from traditional psalm books.

In these ways, we note in closing, these dialectics in the renegotiations of authority appear to correlate with parallel emergences of hybrid senses

of self and identity, as we have examined above. That is, there clearly are many "hyperindividuals" who, as facilitated by networked communication media, prefer to spend much of their life online (often for very good reasons), exploring, developing, and then abandoning networked relationships that thus befit more postmodernist senses of selfhood as multiple, fluid, and ephemeral—and largely as disconnected with, and to the exclusion of, real-world relationships and identities. At the same time, however, just as religious institutions are learning to renegotiate traditional authority and structures of hierarchy in the face of the multiple ways Web 2.0 technologies facilitate challenges to these, so many congregants are apparently learning how to be both traditional selves (i.e., as marked by more singular, enduring, rational, selfhood and autonomy, as affiliated with literacy-print) and contemporary selves (as more multiple, fluid, ephemeral—and, perhaps, more emotive— as affiliated with new and digital media technologies).

In Vivo Religion 2.0 and Beyond

In closing, we note that the placement of a question mark behind the nomenclature of digital religion evinces our reconsideration of the wholesale embrace of Web 2.0 on the one hand, and the critical examination of emerging and hybridizing patterns of change with regard to mediated faith practices on the other hand. The question mark is also, to use a customary expression, a journey, in which the ongoing enterprise begins here to make sense of how new and emerging practices of religion emend our comprehension of Religion 2.0 and beyond; as a process that encompasses the dynamic nature of cultural processes. And this is a significant journey that we undertake, together with our contributors, fueled by new technological vistas and the fertile landscape of prior scholarship. As Stewart Hoover and Knut Lundby (1997) presciently observed, we require more thoughtful attention toward a triadic understanding of media, religion, and culture, as these areas are "interpenetrated by one another" (p. 6). This volume thereby represents a cross-disciplinary venture to refine our understanding of the burgeoning social web of digital religion, with insights into the varied meanings of technology, in different cultural grounds. Humbly, the view here is that the road of learning and discovery goes on—the only certainty is that everything is in flux. But through these contributions, as now illuminated in terms of larger patterns and findings in contemporary Internet Studies, we hope our readers come away with at least a reasonably grounded theoretical and empirical (if not also theologically informed) understanding of how Religion 2.0 appears to work and function in the contemporary world.

Finally, we wish to express our deep thanks to our colleagues and families. It has been a mount of hard work, and a joy to work as an international

editorial team. Of course, no single researcher or editor can hope to develop anything even approximating a clear and comprehensive picture of the vast and constantly changing landscape of digital religion, especially as a globally distributed phenomenon. But we are heartened by the results of this transnational and cross-cultural collaboration. That is not to say that we believe the results of our collaboration achieve completeness: it is to say that we believe our collective work results in a much broader view, one shaped by a much greater diversity of perspectives and experiences, than any of us could have achieved on our own. Such collaboration, of course—across diverse cultures, time zones, and disciplines—brings its own set of challenges as well. We wish to acknowledge with gratitude how enjoyable—and, at times, downright fun—this collaboration has been, thanks to the patience, perseverance, and good humor of each of our co-editors. It is our privilege to introduce this inspiring multidisciplinary volume to you.

Note

1. Readers should remember here that "Evangelical" in the U.S. context usually refers to those traditions— often also characterized as charismatic or Pentecostal—that highlight not simply mission (evangelism) but also emotive experiences of "being saved" as primary signs of religious authenticity, etc. By contrast, "Evangelical" in the European context usually refers to churches in Protestant, often specifically Lutheran, traditions. In the northern European context in particular, these churches rather stress modernist conceptions of rationality as critical elements in religious identity and reflection—again, as such rationality (and individual autonomy) correlates with the emphasis on literacy and print in modernity. (This is not to say that Evangelicalism—whether in the U.S., Europe, or elsewhere—is thoroughly modernist: on the contrary, Evangelicalism began in part in reaction against various expressions of modernity, including a pitting of personal-felt experience of the Divine (and fideism, more broadly) against critical-rational approaches (including, e.g., historical-critical approaches to interpreting Scripture).

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