

The Chronicles of Me: Understanding Blogging as a Religious Practice

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Abstract: Blogs represent an especially interesting site of online religious communication. Analysis of the content of 200 blogs with mentions of topics related to Christianity, as well as interviews of a subset of these bloggers, suggests that blogs provide an integrative experience for the faithful, not a “third place,” but a melding of the personal and the communal, the sacred and the profane. Religious bloggers operate outside the realm of the conventional nuclear church as they connect and link to mainstream news sites, other nonreligious blogs, and online collaborative knowledge networks such as Wikipedia. By chronicling how they experience faith in their everyday lives, these bloggers aim to communicate not only to their communities and to a wider public but also to themselves. This view of blogging as a contemplative religious experience differs from the popular characterization of blogging as a trivial activity.

With the growth of the Internet, many religious believers and institutions have adopted technology for expressing their faith, reaching out to nonbelievers, and building stronger ties among believers (Dawson & Cowan, 2004). Blogs have emerged as a popular genre of online communication and have been utilized for religious expression, but scarce attention has been paid to understanding emergent blogging practices, particularly blogging as a religious practice. According to Buddenbaum’s review of social science and the study of media and religion (2002), the tendency among researchers has been to

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“study the media and religion in isolation from each other and both at least somewhat separate from other institutions and from the surrounding culture” (p. 14). Subsequently, research in newer media needs to incorporate religion in the contemporary information society, including the study of religious blogging.

The emergence of blogs also raises important questions about storytelling and self-representation, motivations for media use, and the building of community online. Accordingly, the presence of religious discourse in blogs calls for fresh thinking about the representation of believers and their faiths, motivations for religious storytelling, the constitution of religious practices, together with the interplay of online and offline connections among religious believers, nonbelievers, and seekers. The rise of online scribes or religiously inspired blog authors poses interesting questions about the changing nature of personal media uses and gratifications and the role of new media in peoples’ everyday lives, including their spiritual verve.

This study explores blogging as a religious practice in order to understand the nature of blogs, the motivations behind blog use for religious expression, and the implications for religious community building. We first discuss the debate concerning the rise of online religions, two views on religiosity and Internet use, the emergence of blogs as an alternative form of communication and with the potential to be shaped as “sacred spaces” for religious community. Following that, we deploy several levels of data to capture and analyze the ways and extent to which the blogosphere functions as a space for various religious expressions and practices associated with Christianity.

ONLINE RELIGION: GOD IN THE BLOGOSPHERE

In recent years, online religious activity has been identified as popular and important. For example, according to the latest results of the Pew Internet and American Life Project study on “cyber-faith,” 64% of “wired Americans” have used the Internet for various religious purposes, including activities such as seeking and giving religious information/advice online, downloading religious music, and purchasing religious items (Hoover, Clarke, & Rainie, 2004). However, there are concerns about the role of the Internet in fraying religious ties given how some commentators have noted that the momentum of religion is increasingly in the practices of “autonomous selves” (Giddens, 1991), as individuals choose to consume online religious experiences and withdraw from houses of worship (Lyon, 2000). Alternatively, the Internet is seen as a place of revival given the waning influence of religious institutions (Cobb, 1998).

Yet, given the nature of the Internet as a meta-medium (Agre, 1998), debate on the influence of the Internet on religious practice is largely dependent on the particular technology in use. Blogs represent one of the more recent incarnations of social software supported by networked computing (Tepper,

2003). They represent the culmination of two decades of software systems that support threaded, persistent conversations, including Usenet, Bulletin Board Systems, listservs, and Internet forums. The most recent uses of the Web—sometimes called Web 2.0—are marked not only by their openness to contributions by the user but also by their tendency to foment community. Definitions of blogs generally note that they are frequently updated sites, with dated postings, often linking to, and linked from, other blogs (Walker, 2005; Winer, 2003).

Recent data document the swelling growth of weblogs in the last three years. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project's study on "content creation online," more than 53 million or about 44% of adult American Internet users have contributed material online. Eleven percent of Internet users have read or visited the blogs of other Internet users, and about one-third of these visitors have posted material to the blog (Lenhart, Horrigan & Fallows, 2004). Technorati, a blog search engine, reports it is currently tracking nearly 70 million blogs, with more than 1.6 million new posts daily (technorati.com., March 1, 2007), and that number continues to grow exponentially. These blogs support a range of issues, including political commentary (Matheson, 2003), scholarly research (Halavais, 2006), blawgs that cover legal matters (Oi, 2006), economic blogs (Quiggin, 2006), and kittyblogs of oversharing triviality (McFedries, 2003). Although recent books on blogging have documented blogs in different industrial and social contexts (e.g., Bruns & Jacobs, 2006; Tremayne, 2006), no one has published on religious-related blogs. Given the rise of online religious activity, bloggers may also act as online scribes and contribute to the rise of online religion, a form of many-to-many religious communication developed aside from the influence of religious institutions (Helland, 2002).

RELIGIOUS BLOGGING: DIFFERENT PARADIGMS ON RELIGIOSITY AND INTERNET USE

On the micro-level of individual Internet use, various commentators have expressed contrasting assessments for religiosity and Internet use that have implications for religious blogging. One view argues that the Internet presents dramatic challenges to religious adherents, as secularization theory posits an inverse relationship between the processes of modernization (technological, social, and economic) and the importance of religion and religious beliefs in society (McGrath, 2004). As traditional peoples began to understand science and technology, increasing educational levels lead to a more skeptical attitude toward religious belief, undermining religiously-oriented belief systems. Religious leaders lose their efficacy as other forms of authority (such as the state, educational leaders, scientists, etc.) teach and legislate in life domains that had previously been dominated by religious authorities (Norris & Inglehart, 2004).

Various communication scholars have applied the tenets of secularization theory to posit a significant negative relationship between religion and mass media use, as the mass media is perceived by some to be aligned with the values of modern, secular society (Buddenbaum & Stout, 1996). For instance, secularization theory has been used to explain how religious adherence may negatively predict older forms of media such as newspaper reading and television viewing since some people allegedly shun media that are perceived to be incompatible with their beliefs (Buddenbaum, 1986; Hamilton & Rubin, 1992). Recently, Armfield and Holbert (2003) examined the statistical relationship between religiosity and Internet use and concluded that results from their survey data analysis showed that “the more religious an individual is, the less likely he or she will use the Internet” (p. 139). Drawing upon a model of secularism as well as uses and gratifications, they argue that their results may be explained by the perceived ethos of the Internet since “Internet largely embodies a more secular worldview,” religious persons are less likely to use it (p. 136). They also note that their application of secularization theory “mirrors the personal identity function of media outlined in uses and gratifications scholarship which states that individuals often turn to the media to reinforce some preexisting norm or value structure and shy away from those media outlets that do not reflect their values” (p. 130). From this viewpoint, believers who construe the Internet to be antithetical to their faith beliefs and practices may be less enthusiastic about the Internet and utilizing the blogosphere.

Another more recently articulated view emphasizes a positively synergistic relationship between religiosity and Internet use. Recent studies argue that Internet use by individual believers may be attributed to the extent to which religious communities spiritualize and socially shape the Internet in line with their discourse, worldviews, and practices (Barzilai-Nahon & Barzilai, 2005; Cheong & Poon, 2008). Kluver & Cheong (2007) argue against the secularization thesis in light of technological modernization by discussing how religious leaders of five world religions perceive the Internet as compatible in a highly wired context and mandate its use for institutional growth and community building. A socio-historical perspective on the religious use of mass media also highlights how the religious have strategically employed the newest technology throughout its history (Soukup, 2002). Starting with the acts of writing on paper to print images, radio, and television broadcasts, the Internet is the latest medium to be adopted in ways similar to how older forms of mass media have been utilized to advance religious missions. It is particularly interesting that Serfaty (2004) notes that the tradition of blogging finds some of its roots in the religious diaries of previous centuries. In contemporary society, according to Ammerman (1997), a voluntaristic mode of spiritual involvement is emerging where fluid and plural types of commitment, diverse worship approaches, and a bricolage of convenient, portable religious practices exist. She recommends future research to examine “how religious rhetorics and practices are enacted” (p. 205), given how

traditional dichotomies such as sacred-secular and member-nonmember are increasingly irrelevant in a world where “actors are constantly choosing their ways of being religious” (p. 204).

The blogosphere serves as an interesting social laboratory to examine the emerging mode of religious connections, especially in light of recent evidence suggesting the Internet is the “new normal” increasingly woven into people’s daily rhythms of work, play, and critical life decisions (Rainie & Horrigan, 2005). For instance, ethnographic research conducted on Christian email communities shows how Christians have perceived the Internet as a “sacramental space” and socially shape it for their information seeking, worship, and interaction with other believers (Campbell, 2005). More specifically, Murley (2005) points out how blogs may serve as an “extension of the Reformation concept of the priesthood of all believers” providing individuals the freedom to express their views on faith outside the confines of organized religion and mediation of religious leadership. Likewise, according to Murley (2005), blogs may provide ministers an alternative space to broadcast their beliefs on contemporary spirituality, including critiques of existing religious practices; an act of resistance akin to Martin Luther’s nailing of the 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg Church that sparked off the Protestant Reformation. Forbes & Mahan (2005) note that blogging “fully represents the paradox of the internet, creating greater individualism in religion at the same time that it forms new communities” (p. 131). Perhaps most striking in the material examined below is the degree to which conservative Catholics in the United States have embraced this role of direct interpretation. Several commentators have also argued that the Internet is the ideal space for religious imaginings as certain inherent characteristics of the Internet are conducive for cyber spirituality. For example, Henderson (2000) writes that the Internet is a fitting religious symbol as it has corresponding features to the image of God as being accessible at any place, at any time, and for anyone.

The motivations for religious blogging may also encompass less extreme needs for confrontation and opposition, and may include other personal needs. According to prior research on the uses and gratifications theory, people selectively use mass media to fulfill one or more of the following needs for information, personal identity, integration and social interaction, and entertainment (Blumer & Klatz, 1974; Palmgreen, 1984). Given how audiences can now actively interact with the Internet, the popularization of the Internet has revitalized interest in the uses and gratifications of newer media (Ruggiero, 2004). Blogs with their chronological entry and hyperlink connections may redefine the processes of need gratifications and media use, blurring interpersonal communication and mass media use as gratifications may come from the medium’s content, from general exposure to blogs, from familiarity with the genre of religious blogs, and from the context in which it is used. Based on an analysis of interviews with 23 popular bloggers in the United States, Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz (2004) identified five motivations for blogging; documenting one’s life, providing commentary and

opinions, expressing deeply felt emotions, articulating ideas through writing, and forming and maintaining community forums. With regard to religion, blogs may also represent a reintegration of religious life into the practices of the everyday as even among blogs that are explicitly dedicated to religious topics, the breadth of entries spans a wide range of public and personal concerns. Likewise, on blogs that are not directly religious in nature, some entries are clearly marked by religious practice and influenced by spiritual beliefs.

In sum, given the dearth of research specific to religious blogging, we were interested to find out how individuals are utilizing the Internet for religiously related discourse, in particular to examine a) the content of religion-related blogs, b) the degree to which religious blogging is integrated into other spaces on the Web, and c) the motivations of bloggers who blog as a form of religious practice. As Herring et al. (2004) note, weblogs are “the latest genre of Internet communication to attain widespread popularity, yet their characteristics have not been systematically described.” They report that results from their content analysis of 203 randomly selected weblogs show that media coverage, scholars and bloggers exaggerate the extent to which blogs are linked, interactive, and oriented toward external events, and underestimate the importance of blogs as individualistic, intimate forms of self-expression. Therefore, although a paucity of research exists on religiously oriented blogs, we expect that the blogosphere may serve as a growing locus for religious expression and an alternative arena to established religious organizations and practices. This study takes an “ecumenical” approach to the exploration of blogging as religious practice; an interdisciplinary and multi-method data collection and analysis approach recommended for the study of new fields of media and religion (Buddenbaum, 2002). In the next section, we describe our data collection steps and methods of analysis.

EXAMINING RELIGION-RELATED BLOGS

While the totality of blogs is often referred to as a seemingly unitary “blogosphere,” that label covers a variety of sites created by different individuals and groups for different audiences, with varying intentions. Many blogs are started and then quickly abandoned, never having reached a continuing readership, or are rarely or never linked to by other bloggers (Henning, 2004; Herring, 2005; Li & Walejko, 2007; Trammell, Tarkowski, Hofmohl, & Sapp, 2006). Because we were interested in “public” blogs, those that were read by some form of audience and had a community following, however small, we collected a purposive sample of blogs from Technorati (<http://www.technorati.com>). Technorati provides a way of ranking blogs by citations and was used because blogs tracked by Technorati are integrated into the larger community of the blogosphere to some degree. Also, Technorati provides the ability to search for the most recently posted items that include a given keyword.

During the four days ending in Easter 2006, URLs were identified for 200 blogs that had recently posted something containing a keyword related

to Christianity. First, a dictionary of terms was constructed, drawing on a previous content analysis dictionary (Stone, 1966) and a printed dictionary of religious terms (Kauffman, 1969). From this larger dictionary, 10 keywords were chosen that were most likely to yield Christianity-related posts: Bible, Christ, church, congregation, lord, pastor, pray, priest, salvation, and faith. Using these search terms several times each day, blogs were drawn as long as they were publicly accessible; blogs that required passwords or were otherwise not public were excluded. We chose only blogs that were predominantly written in English. Blogs that used the terms in nonreligious contexts (for example, “priest” used as surname or as a character-class in some games) were excluded.

Front pages of these blogs were archived and content analyzed by human coders, seeking information on items that indicate general topical coverage of the blogs, linkage patterns, and indications of the uses and gratifications afforded by the blog to the blogger. The coding frame was composed of 8 blog-level variables and 99 entry-level variables. Eight blog-level variables included basic information for self-introduction, the first five links on the blogroll (list of other blogs the author likes or reads), when it was present, and indications of the number of authors and whether they identified their blog or themselves with particular religions. An additional 99 variables were coded for the first four blog entries listed on the index page that were over 50 words in length. These included content-related indicators, a coding of the first three hyperlinks present in the entry, perceived intentions, objectives, or gratifications of the entry, and coding of the comments for the entry. Content-related themes coded on the entry-level were summed up later and re-analyzed for the blog-level exploration. For example, if content of religious news was coded as “1 (existing)” at least in one of four postings, it was re-coded as “1” on blog-level. It should be noted that as in other exploratory coding of blog content and intent of users (e.g., Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Papacharissi, 2006), we did not analyze content as a single mutually exclusive unit, as doing so potentially reduced the degree to which we could measure the co-occurrence of particular themes. As a result, we did not use factor analysis or other forms of statistical inference that depend on such mutual exclusivity. Ten percent of each of these frames was coded twice to test for inter-rater reliability. Cohen’s kappa was more than 0.8 for all variables. Given the exploratory nature of this research, we triangulated our quantitative analysis with qualitative interviews with direct questions to the authors of a subset of the blogs in the sample regarding their blogging practices, intentions, and motivations. Of 200 bloggers, 49 responded to the e-mail interview conducted in October 2006.

Characteristics of the Sample

An archive of the front page of each of these blogs was collected, along with the contemporaneous authority rank on Technorati, when available. As

noted, this rank indicates how many hyperlinks from other blogs link to a particular blog. The top-ranked blogs in Technorati routinely receive more than 100,000 in-links from other blogs. The highest ranked blog in our sample was at number 995. A substantial number (64) were not ranked because they lacked a profile on Technorati, though their postings were available through a search. The median ranking of blogs with ranks on Technorati was 463,342 and is distributed heavily toward the tail of the rankings. While there is not necessarily a correlation between the Technorati rank and blog traffic, the Alexa service (www.alexa.com) estimates the reach of the top-ranked blog in the sample at 8.75 per million internet users, while a site that is ranked 9,811 on Technorati, Alexa estimates a reach of 0.1 per million. The majority of the blogs tracked in this sample receive too little traffic to be tracked by Alexa. In other words, the blogs that make up this sample are part of what has been called the “long tail” of blogs, representing the less visible, everyday practice of blogging.

The sample was collected based on the appearance of terms related to Christianity. This intentionally resulted in a sample that included both blogs devoted to religious topics and those that mentioned religious topics only in passing. Of the 200 blogs, 80 provided a clear indication that religion was an important part of the blog. Forty-six (23%) included religious terms in their title or the “motto” of the site (e.g., “A Catholic Guy”). Of the 72 blogs that included a statement about the purpose of the blog, 18 (25%) indicated that the blog had a religious focus, and of the 138 with some form of a biographical note, 56 (41%) provided a religious affiliation. Fifteen of the blogs were in some way affiliated with a local church or congregation. Most (173) did not clearly identify a denomination, but Catholics, Episcopalians, and Baptists made up half of those who did indicate a particular denomination.

A proportion of blogs in the sample (64%) was not “religious blogs” and made use of religious terms sporadically. A number of these posted complaints or criticisms of Christianity, its religious practices and complaints against clergy (e.g., “the pastor is a [expletive] and can’t so much as return a phone call . . .”), or a criticism of the faithful (e.g., “I am far, far more frightened by the idea of a Christian running at me with a Bible than I am by an Arab approaching me with a bomb strapped to his chest”). Many, however, simply used religious terms only in passing (e.g., “it is just that when I see a chicken, I don’t think ‘oh, poor little helpless creature of God.’”)

RESULTS

Topics of Blog Posts

Given the dearth of research specific to religious blogging, we were interested to find what sorts of utterances were produced by bloggers who touched on religious topics. We sought out postings in the five broad themes listed in

Table 1. Types of religious content appearing in blogs

Type of content	Number of blogs
Personal religiosity	89 (44.5%)
Didactic content	78 (39.0%)
Criticism and social issues	45 (22.5%)
News and information	31 (15.5%)
Coordination of practices	14 (7%)

Table 1. Of the 200 blogs, the most frequent appearance of religious motifs was found in descriptions of personal experiences, emotional reactions, and thoughts about God (89 of the 200 blogs). This was followed by didactic content (78), religious and social criticism (45), news and information (31), and efforts to coordinate events, gatherings, and other “real life” social activities (14). As noted, these themes are nonexclusive so that a posting, for example, that celebrates a personal experience (rejoicing in the author’s 26th year as a Catholic), might also connect with other church members, or provide a Christian perspective on a current event. A recent survey of bloggers by the Pew Internet and American Life project presents a similar set of motivations expressed by bloggers more generally (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). It finds that among the major reasons for blogging, authors list “documenting personal experiences” (50%) and “sharing practical knowledge or skills” (34%), which appear to be aligned with our categories for “personal religiosity” and “didactic content.”

More detail is available by concentrating on the posts individually. A total of 789 individual posts were coded. Many of the postings lacked any content related to religion, as we will explore further below. Of those that did contain references to religion, many (89) were made only in passing. Some of these—requesting prayers or invoking the name of God—clearly identify the author as religious, but provide little more information than this. Others simply note that the author went to church or reference the upcoming holiday.

A number of different sorts of content make up the broader “personal religiosity” category, including observations of faith and descriptions of religious experiences. The majority of postings in this category were those in which bloggers made positive emotional statements of devotion, awe, appreciation, or belief (76 postings). In many cases, these were simple expressions (“I’m just so grateful for Christ’s sacrifice”), but often these were tied to a description of everyday experiences of the blogger, which they indicated helped to cement their belief or demonstrate the existence of God in their own life (“I found myself so moved by the motions of the towel, wiping it dry.”). Several posts (22) spoke against the church or the faithful. Some of these were also emotional (“What the hell is wrong with these people?????”), but

many were merely skeptical or sarcastic (“And, for today only, he is dying for the consumption of chocolate eggs before noon.”).

Many of the personal statements also represented more contemplative statements about the author’s own faith. By its nature, much of this is intended to present a perspective on some particular element of faith, for example, the meaning of the crucifixion and resurrection (53 postings). These rarely were critical of a particular position but rather presented some form of a justification for the individual’s personal faith. Personal religious experiences also included accounts of participation in rituals such as attending church (28 posts) or engaging in missionary or evangelistic work, pilgrimages, Bible study, meditation, and other religious activities (28 posts).

The second broad category was “didactic” or “educational” posts; those intended to inform the reader on the topic of faith from an authoritative source. While some of the critical posts might also be educational, the posts in the “didactic” category generally drew on existing authoritative claims. Some (21 postings) made reference to the history of Christianity and other religions, or important figures (e.g., hagiography). A larger number presented references from the Bible (59 postings) or by other authoritative religious or scholarly texts (72 postings), including sermons and catechism reference works. Indeed, while reference to web-accessible news is common among bloggers, the religious bloggers in our sample made reference to published works at an extraordinarily high rate.

While strictly didactic content and theological criticism may seem easy to confuse, we took the former to be based in authoritative reference, while the latter clearly indicated an area of disagreement. Because the categorization was nonexclusive, some postings fell into both of these categories, providing an argument and citing authoritative works. We identified three forms of criticism employed by bloggers. The first and most prevalent was criticisms of the institutions of the church, or of particular dogma or orthodoxies (26 postings). Many of these included theological arguments to convince the reader of a particular position, or recapitulated internecine conflicts. A related group of posts presented or argued against critiques of Christianity (17 postings). Finally, 19 postings took up an argument over social issues—abortion, foreign affairs, and gay and lesbian issues, among others—from a religious perspective.

A number of the postings seemed to be largely informational, providing some form of news or information related to religious practice. For example, if news sites included a story relevant to the bloggers’ own church or denomination, they might summarize it and link to it (34 posts). News items that treated broader social issues of religious interest were also noted (11 postings) even if they did not include an extensive discussion. The final category consisted of postings related to a particular church or religious organization, seeking to announce, organize, or coordinate the actions of the group (19 postings). Occasionally, a posting attempted to bring together the virtual community for a “meet-up” to continue the discussions already started online.

By understanding the composition of the typical religious blog post, we begin to form a picture of religious blogging as a practice. In some ways, religious blogging reflects the standard interests of bloggers everywhere. There is a focus on documenting personal experience, followed by interest in teaching and learning, as well as monitoring and making sense of the mainstream news. Beyond blogging, these are the kinds of functions Harold Lasswell (1948) identified as being at the core of mass communication in the middle of the last century. While religious blogging echos the practices of blogging generally, it also emphasizes a particularly integrative function. While blog punditry and political blogs may rely on the news media to feed their conversations, religious bloggers seem more likely to gather from a combination of sources: their own lived experience, and the texts and beliefs of their community.

INTEGRATING RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

One of our central questions was the degree to which religious blogging was integrated into other forms of blogging and other spaces on the Web. That is, while a greater division between religious and secular discourse in the West may be dictated in part by the place-based institutions of each, does the blogosphere allow for greater integration of religious thought with activities in other public realms? What is the context of religious blogging? To answer that question we examined the degree to which topics, hyperlinks, and comments tended to be more integrated between religious and non-religious subjects, and what factors influenced this.

As noted, each of the first four entries was coded for topic. While some detail was extracted from religious postings, the general category of non-religious postings was also coded. While much of this content was social commentary, the most frequent form of blogging was the relation of everyday activities and thoughts, which made up 323 of the 789 posts. Of these postings about everyday personal events, 122 also included some form of religious commentary. Thus, within a large number of posts, we saw mixtures of religious and other contexts where bloggers located the sacred within the profane and vice versa.

Many of these posts that mixed the everyday with the religious concerned the daily minutia of participating in a religious group, or engaging in religious interests. For example, one blogger asks for advice on where to buy Mormon art in Salt Lake City, and a number of readers respond with suggestions. Another remarks, "I woke up at 9:30 to sing in the church choir, completely sleep-deprived because I was up late getting drunk at a drag show. I like to keep balance in my life." As in other forms of blogging, this provides an interesting window into the everyday practices of religion. For example, some popular blogs track a pastor's process of writing a sermon, and provide a kind of transparency that might otherwise be absent. Others post about the spiritu-

ality of everyday events. A blogger writes of the vocation of nurses who must counsel a daughter who is watching her father die slowly. The same blogger writes, "Ice cream is one of my proofs of God's existence." In some ways, this encapsulates many of the ways religious bloggers discover grace in the joys and challenges of their everyday lives, and share these lessons with readers.

Devout bloggers are certainly not the only ones who blog about religion in their daily lives. One blogger writes about his agnosticism, while another blogger indicates a former priest convinced the blogger never to pray again. A number of the entries complained about the Easter holiday and friends and relatives bringing the bloggers to church. One blogger pleaded for Christians to "stop ambushing us honest heathens at the shopping malls in some bizarre attempt to drag us to church." No doubt, such an integration of everyday experience with spiritual reflection appears in private conversations, and occasionally within sermons, but blogging provides an unusual platform for the mixture of the profane with the sacred, the everyday with the eternal.

THE BLOGOSPHERE CONTEXT

Much has been written about the structure of hyperlinks within the blogosphere (Park & Thelwall, 2003). While the blogosphere is in some ways an interconnected whole, it is clearly not a uniform space. What is the context of religious blogging within the larger network of blogs? We extracted all of the external hyperlinks on the index pages of our sample, and examined the most popular links. We also took the first five hyperlinks of each of the posts we examined and coded them for type and apparent reason for use.

Table 2 lists the domains present in hyperlinks on the index page of four or more blogs in each of two groups: blogs that provided some form of indication of being "religious blogs" and those that did not. A total of 8,409 hyperlinks were extracted from the first group (80 blogs), and 9,855 were extracted from the second (120 blogs). Excluded from these lists are links to sites that may be considered in some way infrastructural, such as blogger.com and livejournal.com, which, while they may not have been internal to the blog itself, were integral to its operation. Links that were added as advertising to free blog hosts were excluded. Finally, also excluded were links to sites that provided technical support like feed services, image and file hosting, and statistics generators.

The sites that prove to be most interesting to members of the two groups can provide some indication of collective interests. Turning first to the sites most frequently linked to from blogs that are not self-identified as religious, we find a distribution of favorite sites that is not far from what we might expect from the larger universe of blogs. Prominent in this list is the number of mainstream news sites, which have consistently been among the most-linked sites among blogs (Halavais, 2002). News sites are present among the religious bloggers as well, though not in as great a number. The religious

Table 2. URLs of sites linked to by four or more of the blogs in the sample

Religious domain	# Linking	Nonreligious domain	# Linking
http://www.amazon.com	21	http://news.yahoo.com	14
http://en.wikipedia.org	18	http://en.wikipedia.org	13
http://creativecommons.org	18	http://www.nytimes.com	13
http://technorati.com	18	http://www.washingtonpost.com	12
http://www.truthlaidbear.com	15	http://www.imdb.com	12
http://www.bloglines.com	14	http://technorati.com	12
http://www.google.com	12	http://rpc.blogrolling.com	11
http://rpc.blogrolling.com	10	http://michellemalkin.com	10
http://www.ringsurf.com	9	http://www.bloglines.com	10
http://www.blogwise.com	9	http://www.technorati.com	10
http://www.nytimes.com	8	http://www.cnn.com	9
http://www.technorati.com	8	http://www.nationalreview.com	9
http://www.feedburner.com	7	http://www.amazon.com	9
http://www.biblegateway.com	7	http://www.truthlaidbear.com	8
http://www.blogstreet.com	7	http://maps.google.com	8
http://www.newsgator.com	7	http://www.google.com	8
http://news.bbc.co.uk	6	http://www.townhall.com	7
http://www.washingtonpost.com	6	http://www.latimes.com	7
http://www.blogcatalog.com	5	http://www.drudgereport.com	6
http://blogs.salon.com	5	http://www.guardian.co.uk	6
http://www.christianitytoday.com	5	http://news.bbc.co.uk	5
http://homepage.mac.com	5	http://www.blogarama.com	5
http://www.getreligion.org	5	http://www.blogrolling.com	5
http://www.ewtn.com	4	http://abcnews.go.com	5
http://amywelborn.typepad.com	4	http://creativecommons.org	5
http://www.blogarama.com	4	http://www.telegraph.co.uk	5
http://www.cafepress.com	4	http://www.foxnews.com	5
http://www.challies.com	4	http://www.newsgator.com	5
http://www.vatican.va	4	http://www.boston.com	5
http://www.prolifeblogs.com	4	http://www.opinionjournal.com	4
http://www.jordoncooper.com	4	http://www.usatoday.com	4
http://www.geocities.com	4	http://mediamatters.org	4
http://www.one.org	4	http://kevan.org	4
http://www.nationalreview.com	4	http://weblog.herald.com	4
http://www.evangelicaloutpost.com	4	http://www.makepovertyhistory.org	4
http://www.feedblitz.com	4	http://www.worldnetdaily.com	4
http://www.blogs4god.com	4	http://www.whitehouse.gov	4
http://www.thestar.com	4	http://www.newyorker.com	4
http://www.sojo.net	4	http://www.buzzmachine.com	4
http://www.newadvent.org	4	http://instapundit.com	4
		http://www.ringsurf.com	4
		http://www.dailykos.com	4
		http://www.khaleejtimes.com	4
		http://www.leftyblogs.com	4

bloggers supplement these mainstream news outlets with information sources specific to religious concerns. Christianity Today, for example, is a Web site and online magazine that features resources and stories of interest to Christians, EWTN is the Web site for a Catholic organization that produces religious broadcasting and other activities, and Sojourners (sojo.net) is an online magazine covering “faith, politics, culture.”

The nonreligious bloggers also prove to be a good source of links to what are sometimes called the “A-list” blogs that garner a particularly large readership. These include blogs such as Michelle Malkin, Buzzmachine, Instapundit, and the Daily Koz, each of which figure on the top hundred popular blogs listed on Technorati. These blogs are less linked to among the religious bloggers. Naturally, some of this has to do with the difference in numbers of blogs in the two groups. Nonetheless, the Daily Koz, a popular liberal political blogger, for example, is only linked to from one of the index pages among the self-identified religious blogs. The religious bloggers clearly have their own A-list. Included among these are Get Religion, Amy Welborn, Tim Challies, Jordon Cooper, and the Evangelical Outpost. Technorati suggests that each of these blogs receive thousands of links from the blogosphere at large, reinforcing the idea that they represent a community A-list, an alternative to the sites most frequently linked to from bloggers whose focus is not primarily religious. The idea of an alternative is reinforced by the masthead of Get Religion, which includes a quotation from William Schneider, a political analyst: “The press . . . just doesn’t get religion.” In addition to the major blogs, two aggregators that collect and display posts from a variety of religious bloggers (prolifeblogs and blogs4God) are often linked from the blogs that self-identify as religious. Just as very popular blogs have risen to the level of mass media for the blogosphere as a whole, and thereby gained recognition from the traditional mass media, certain Christian bloggers have attracted a similar large audience from their own community. It would be interesting to discover the degree to which traditional Christian media are attending to this “Christian A-List.”

Among the blog services frequently referenced by all the blogs in the sample was Technorati, which in addition to tracking blogs more generally provides the ability to include topic tags in individual blogs. These provide an avenue through which bloggers can engage in a dialog of postings across blogs. In total there were 104 such tags among the religious blogs and 211 among the nonreligious blogs. Perhaps unsurprisingly, only 16 of the tags in the nonreligious blogs were in some way religiously oriented (Arminianism, Baptism, Calvinism, Catholic, Catholics, Christian Politics, Christians, Christianity, Good Friday, Gospel, Irresistible Grace, Jesus, Kingdom of God, Pope Benedict, Spirituality, Temple Emmanuel). In other words, authors generally did not think of their religious posts as something that they should classify as part of a larger discussion of religious issues. On the other hand, more than half, or 58, of the 104 tags among the blogs that self-identified as religious were also religious in nature.

Table 3. Target of hyperlinks within sampled blog entries, according to self-identification of religious intent of blog

Type of target	From religious blogs	From nonreligious blogs
Personal Web site of same religion/denomination	34	8
Institutional Web site of same religion/denomination	40	12
Personal Web site of different religion/denomination	2	1
Institutional Web site of different religion/denomination	1	0
Secular source of religious information	35	15
Not religion-related	38	103

Another common link was to Wikipedia, a collaboratively edited online encyclopedia. Of the 104 links from self-identified religious blogs, only 10 were religious in nature. Only 41 links were made from the nonreligious blogs directly to Wikipedia articles, and only 2 of these were to an article with a religious topic ("Catharism" and "Pope Benedict XVI").

Other sites emerge as authoritative in each of the two groups. For example, while the official White House site is frequently linked among the nonreligious bloggers, the official Vatican site is among the most linked for religious bloggers. Likewise, a Bible gateway site that provides biblical quotations ranks highly among religious bloggers. To borrow the title of a well-known paper on hyperlink analysis, "You are what you link," (Adamic & Adar, 2001), and the community of religious bloggers shows one facet of its character in the makeup of the links it shares.

Table 3 outlines the types of sites that the bloggers in the sample linked to in their "blogroll," the list of sites they believe their readers would be interested in. Those blogs identified by their religiosity unsurprisingly are more likely to link to other religious blogs, and most frequently blogs that represent their own denomination of Christianity. In both the case of links more broadly, and the specific case of links in the blogroll, religious bloggers express their community and solidarity with those they are drawn into conversation with.

FROM THE VOICES OF RELIGIOUS BLOGGERS

Past research in the uses and gratifications of mass media have examined the reasons reflected in media use in various forms, including religious television and radio use (e.g., Abelman, 1988; Hamilton & Rabin, 1992). A growing number of studies have examined the uses of the Internet (e.g., Armfield & Holbert, 2003; Flanagan & Metzger, 2001; Laney, 2005), and a small number of studies have started to address blogging from a uses and

gratifications perspective (Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Kaye, 2006; Trammell et al., 2006). Responses from interviews with religious bloggers among the sample analyzed here suggest that blogs are typically used to fulfill the following key needs, including the a) transmission of values, b) entertainment and escapism, c) integration and interaction. In some instances, these needs have been interpreted and expressed in religious terms to refer specifically to the faith factor (Laney, 2005) or the faith-based aspects of these media needs, for example, the motivation to sustain “fellowship” or to interact with and integrate into online and offline religious communities. In addition, according to most blog respondents, their blogs serve multiple purposes, as the motivation for blogging is, in the words of one blogger, “archival tinged with cathartic and communicative purposes” where the “public goal is to offer and argue my views, privately, [...] to blow off steam.”

First, the data suggest that one major use of religiously oriented blogs is to convey and perpetuate the values of religious bloggers. Several bloggers emphasized their role as “online scribes” who chronicle their “spiritual journey via blogging.” A few bloggers said they were particularly motivated to write about religious experiences in their daily lives. They stressed that they provided unique viewpoints from the “intersection of religious faith and the culture at large” as they “write about whatever is going on” and everyday occurrences.

For some bloggers, religious writings online reflected their personal mission to provide a prophetic voice, to “give others inspiration in their lives,” “introduce the relevance of faith in Christ to current issues,” and “to engage people in thoughtful and meaningful dialogue regarding the paradoxes of our faith and practice and the future of the Church.” One subject’s blog provided a means of “articulating a new paradigm” that integrates spirituality with political and cultural concerns. He said,

I am frustrated by polarization in both political and spiritual life. I feel as if our culture has torn apart the truth, like the mother in the King Solomon story who wanted to cut the baby in half. The political and cultural left has part of it, the right has another part, and they’re fighting with each other over which incomplete and bleeding half is sufficient.

A few bloggers also specifically mentioned their blogs as “apologetics,” giving a defense of their faith to “warn and edify the body of Christ.” Two bloggers explicitly cited biblical scripture as a reason for their blog, to “expose the unfruitful works of darkness Ephesians 5:11” and “to introduce or clarify the saving grace of Christ Jesus, John 3:16.” These bloggers highlighted the need for them to “defend religion against anti-religious bigotry, or to talk about religious bigots” as they felt that their voices were marginal and sometimes “distorted and misrepresented” in the blogosphere and mainstream media. In the same vein, some bloggers said that the purpose of much of their writing online was to share their beliefs with people in hopes

of providing a fair religious perspective, to help others better understand their faith:

I have discussed religion as a topic many times and will continue to do so. Religion is a major social and political phenomenon. Unfortunately the mainstream media is actively hostile towards all religion except liberalism. Consequently, the views of a majority are metaphorically seated at the back of the bus. I live in a state with a large dynamic religious community, and I find their views extremely interesting and relevant to the national discourse. It seems 'good business sense' to give voice to the silent majority.

Similarly, another subject noted:

The majority of what goes on my blog is religious content. The reason I do this is because I believe that modern Christianity has perverted my faith and I want to speak out against it. I also like to write things down when I am thinking about them, it helps me figure out what I am thinking. I also want to share my ideas about faith and God with other people.

In this way, their sentiments reflected the findings of earlier research on the use of religious television, where usage was "reactionary" to what is perceived to be "secular" media (Abelman, 1987, 1988). Here, blogs serve as an alternative online space to convey their dissatisfaction with the ways that their faith is presented.

However, not all bloggers expressed an overt evangelistic passion, some commented that their blogs were not aimed to convince their readers but "simply to reflect" their own personal experiences and thoughts. One blogger commented:

I view religion as a private matter. I have faith and it does inform my viewpoints, but the purpose of my writing is not to evangelize or convert.

While another noted:

I have expressed some religious content, mostly how I was raised, and how my religious views are ingrained into my personality, thus, my life. My views are not intended to offend or sway others to see my point of view, rather, offer another perspective, mine.

Thus, blogging provides a venue for the transmission of values and culture, ranging from an explicitly evangelical mission to defend the faith, to goad readers to become seekers, to the subtle expressions of religious views ingrained in personal reflections. In these ways, blogs may serve as "an extension of the priesthood of all believers," providing believers an avenue of expression past the precincts of institutionalized religion (Murley, 2005).

Another key use of religious blogs that emerged from the bloggers interviewed was the need for a writing space to diminish stress. According

to the bloggers, blogs were “an outlet for writing,” a “ventilation system,” “random thought catcher,” a “public diary of sorts,” and a “catharsis that can be accomplished by releasing whatever it is from within yourself, it becomes something that you’d like to keep doing on a higher level.”

Prior literature highlights how religious media use may be seen as a form of leisure providing entertainment and psychological release (Abelman, 1988; Hamilton & Rubin, 1992). Here, according to some bloggers, blogging was professed to be a form of pleasurable escape. However, contrary to the illusory and sometimes deceptive role identity plays online, one blogger commented on the need to present his authentic self, as his blog was a way to share his beliefs. He wrote, “it is my portal directly to my life, in order for people to see the real me.” In addition, this form of cathartic writing is not necessarily crude or loosely constructed as one blogger commented on the form of her personal reflexivity,

I frequently blog about my Christian faith. I do it because it is the highest expression of who I am. I am a reader and thinker and I teach Reformed Christian doctrine to women, so it not only permeates the things I think about but more importantly the way I think.

Hence, the conventional use of media for entertainment is noted by some religious bloggers to be important. Bloggers write to “vent” but the use of blogs for cathartic release is also interpreted more cautiously by some to comprise of an accurate portrayal of self and well-crafted expressions of faith in action.

Finally, the third key expressed by religious bloggers related to the interaction with other believers. Given the interactive capacity of the Internet, several bloggers said their blogs were an avenue for connecting to others and for “God to work” as “the body of Christ is not limited to being inside a church.” One respondent, who was a pastor, mentioned that the blog was “an extension” of his ministry, saying “blogs are a good way to create a place for others to know me better and connect with them more than 1–2 times a week face-to-face.”

The majority of the respondents also mentioned the hyperlinks, hits, and comments from other bloggers, including comments from family, friends, and even strangers who have since become their friends online. In this way, the blog functions as a form of social support, to open up new connections to others, as one blogger said, his blog

has opened up a whole new world to me. I have made connections with so many people all across the country, who I’ve never met, yet I consider them my friends. I journal randomly, yet I am a frequent commenter on many different journals. I enjoy reading about other people and what is going on in their lives. There are several blogs I read that are like a “fix” . . . if I don’t read them first thing in the morning, I feel like I’m missing something. That has surprised

me, wholly . . . I didn't think I'd care about people I don't "know". I feel I've become accepted in a non-judgmental community . . .

Given that blogs are interactive social networking platforms, bloggers may participate actively to comment on other blogs, thus constituting religious networks across the blogosphere as one blogger points out, her blog represents,

. . . more of a network, not really an audience. Many of my blog visitors are from blogs I also read. Other visitors just stumble across it while searching for terms that show up in my tags, or are referrals from other bloggers. Part of the reward of having a blog, other than improving your writing skills and learning more about yourself as you write, is meeting other bloggers and getting to know them. Comments from readers spur you on to more creativity!

Similarly, another blogger likened blogging to a "team sport" where "you give links, you get links. You grow by helping others grow. It's very cooperative." Hence, the integrative use of the blogosphere was perceived to be mostly positive as bloggers said these online connections enabled them to broaden their reach and strengthen the extended "body of Christ." One blogger also noted how comments and the e-mails that he receives also "creates a sense of accountability that was not expected" such that blogging becomes a "discipline and commitment" to produce "writing that delivers epiphany."

CONCLUSION

There are two movements that are sometimes affiliated with Christian blogging. The first is as a space for the "emergent church." The emergent church is a slippery idea, but it is generally associated with a theology accommodative to postmodern culture that does not rely upon a singular, rationalist narrative, draws on a diversity of practices, and generally appeals to a networked generation (Barna, 2005). We find some evidence of discourse in this sample that would tend to indicate work in building alternative frameworks for interpretation. Results from our analyses suggest that some bloggers are articulating critical discourse of the institutionalized character of the church, and debate over traditional norms and practices. Religious bloggers are also operating outside the realm of the conventional nuclear church as they connect and link to the mainstream news sites, other nonreligious blogs, and online collaborative knowledge networks like Wikipedia. However, major parts of the religious blogosphere examined still reflect the influence of traditional religious experiences, including church attendance, Bible study, and missionary work as well as connections to prominent online Christian informational sources, and self-identified Christian authors. While it is often difficult to judge age and approach, many of the bloggers in the sample appear to be older and more inclined to engage in traditional forms of rational theology.

The other frequently referenced group of religious bloggers is the conservative Catholic movement in the United States, an outgrowth of the scandals surrounding the Catholic Church, and what some Catholics in the United States perceive as an approach more liberal than that elsewhere in the world. Without a clear voice in the American Church, many of those who are seeking changes have turned to the Web. A significant number of the blogs in the sample engaged this larger conservative Catholic movement, and these sites tended to be more interlinked and engage in a broader conversation than other blogs in the sample. Interview data from bloggers illustrate why bloggers write, revealing a gradient of needs related to evangelism and sharing of their faith, as they take on varied roles of the online scribe, prophet, and evangelist online. In this way, data here provide further support for the spiritual shaping of technology perspective (e.g., (Campbell, 2005; Kluver & Cheong, 2007), as some bloggers shape the blogosphere in alignment with their spirituality and faith practices.

While these two groups often draw public attention, they are not fully representative of either religious bloggers or religious content in the blogosphere. Religious bloggers represent a multiplicity of intents and practices. For some, this consists of seekers who are documenting a personal spiritual journey. For others, blogging represents little spiritual content. It is an opportunity to vent and represents a document of how the empyrean intersects the everyday. In both cases, there are examples of substantial integration of the religious with the secular, illustrating the dynamics of the nexus between religion, culture, and communication.

In conclusion, given the recent popularity of weblogs and revitalized interest in religious expressions, this study explored both the structural and the descriptive concerns of religion online by examining blog entries and blog links in the blogosphere, and by interviewing bloggers who write about religion. Using a triangulation of qualitative and quantitative methods, this paper investigated the content of religious related blogs, the degree to which religious blogging is integrated into other spaces on the Web and the motivations of bloggers who blog as a form of religious practice.

Findings here present both promising avenues for further research and demonstrate the limitations of the work presented, particularly in terms of the sample. The use of keywords to collect the sample raises two issues. First, in order to limit the number of keywords, it was necessary to restrict our study to Christian-related blogs. The range of religious practices present among bloggers, naturally, extends beyond Christianity. Bunt (2004) has written on the vibrant community of Muslims blogging in Farsi and Arabic in recent years, and others have explored how Buddhists may adopt cyberspace for building community (Prebish, 2004; Kim, 2005), raising the possibility of Buddhist blogs serving as meditation grounds for the exchange of discourse and contemplative psychotherapy (www.sangha.org). While other religions have not received as much scholarly attention, there are many opportunities for studying how religions with different discourse traditions engage this new

medium. Second, the limited size of the sampling dictionary, a necessity of our collection method, may have biased the sample toward particular religious practices. Furthermore, the English-language sample privileged bloggers in English-speaking countries, particularly in the more populated United States. Sampling blogs has always been a complicated affair, and other approaches (e.g., snowballing a sample through hyperlinks from a small set of exemplars) come with different, but equally challenging, biases. Finally, although the window of time just before Easter provided us with a more intensive time of contemplation among Christians and those who would otherwise be at the margins of faith, the degree to which blogging during this period might differ in substance from other periods is not clear.

Future research should expand the investigation by delving into more posts that constitute blog texts within a religious tradition and investigate the links of individual blog posts. As blogs offer an alternative in religious self-expression, future research could investigate the implications of critical communicative shifts on traditional religious norms, including governing sanctions and concepts of religious authority and leadership. A comparative analysis of blog practices by denominations and faith would further illuminate blogging as a religious practice and the (re)integration of religious into everyday life and faith communities.

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