

**Cheong, P.H.** (2014). Religion and the Internet: Understanding digital religion, social media and culture. In G. Laderman & L. Leon (Eds). *Religion and American Cultures. An Encyclopedia of Traditions, Diversity and Popular Expressions* (pp. 1215-1236). Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO.

## **Religion and the Internet:**

### **Understanding Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture**

“I think one of the factors that is of compelling relevance in our time is the speed of change... Things used to change gradually enough to be imperceptible; today the patterns of change are declaring themselves very vividly because of the speed at which they occur... So the young become intolerant. They become aware, through the speed of information, of all the knowledge that only adults were privy to in the past. Then the young simply move in as actor rather than as audience; participation today is a universal pattern in which audience becomes active. There is no more audience in our world. On this planet, the entire audience has been rendered active and participant. Naturally, religion undergoes tremendous changes under these conditions.”

(McLuhan 1999, 84).

Religion and the Internet today is manifest in a variety of fast changing forms but may be appositely introduced here by the world’s most popular religious “app” or mobile application software at the time of writing. Released by the leadership of Lifechurch (Oklahoma, USA) in September 2007, Youversion is a free mobile app which enables mobile phone and tablet users to access and study the Holy Scriptures. The app provides the ability to perform quick searches of particular words or verbs, more than 190 reading plans, a private journal and favorite verse bookmarks. Via social networking, users also have the capability to view and share insights and verses with others via Twitter and e-mail. This app has been downloaded more than 30 million times and on average, by 1 out of 17 electronic devices sold worldwide (Murashko, October 13, 2011).

This app is striking in terms of vast reach and circulation and necessarily prompts us to reflect upon the interplay between religion and the Internet anew. With the emergence of popular parlance like social media, Web 2.0 & 3.0, and 3G & 4G (third and fourth generation) technologies, it is timely to resurrect the concerns of Marshall McLuhan, arguably one of the most influential media theorists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, who anticipated the tremendous changes in religion amidst increasingly wired times of online access and participation.

This chapter provides a discussion on religion's growing online presence, and the evolving ways that believers and seekers are adopting digital media and their socio-spiritual implications, based on a selected review of contemporary research and scholarship. Given that the focus of this encyclopedic compendium is on American history and society, this entry will spotlight advances in this region, while being cognizant of the international flows of the worldwide web and the near impossibility to circumscribe the boundaries of the religious Internet.

Alongside the "youversion" app, the creation and recent flowering of hundreds of religiously themed social networking sites and digital worlds has challenged our understanding of the context and agents of contemporary spirituality, including key substantive concerns about the changing nature of religious community and authority. The rise of the Internet, for example, has refocused our enquiry on the ongoing tensions in our understanding of community, which has been portrayed as embodied and proximate social relations and also imagined sets of people perceived to be similar or have affiliated interests. Furthermore, digital cultural developments have raised fresh questions about the restructuring of authority, which is conventionally believed by many

to be enervated by grassroots activism, participatory democracy and user generated content, yet still in many ways, supported by established powers, regulation and tendencies towards commodification.

Therefore, the aim here is not to cover exhaustively the chronological growth of faith activities online but to discuss key approaches with regard to how far “religion”- meaning minimally here the individual and institutionalized practices, values and beliefs that make up religious and spiritual traditions- has interacted with the multiple affordances and possibilities of computer mediated communication, including the newest form of the Internet as manifest in social media. Social media is broadly aligned with what is popularly known as “Web 2.0” of interactive read-write user-generated content, a shift from a “Web 1.0” email era with read-only content, static HTML websites and directories. Social media includes social networking sites (such as *Facebook* and *MySpace*), blogs and micro-blogs (such as *Twitter*), sites featuring user-generated content (such as *YouTube* and *Wikipedia*), and virtual worlds and gaming sites (such as *Second Life*). This entry will also highlight the emerging and ongoing paradoxes and tensions surrounding religion and the multiplatform Internet to thoughtfully engage awareness and deepen comprehension of the (re) configuration of religious beliefs, practices and infrastructures.

To fulfill this mandate, this chapter will review a variety of key studies conducted along different methodological and conceptual approaches to provide a broad range of examples of multidisciplinary scholarship in the area. The chapter will describe several approaches to theorizing the relationship between religion and the Internet- aligned with functionalist, interpretive, and critical paradigms, and then for each approach, review

selected literature and discuss how the approach conceptualizes the (dis)connections between religion and the Internet, specifically identifying the contributions and limitations in order to highlight pressing issues and research gaps.

Starting with the functionalist investigations, this chapter will first highlight key statistics from several influential survey studies that broadly attempt to map the developments of the Internet and American life to provide a historical snapshot of religious related practices online. Following that, the chapter will discuss multiple studies that are smaller scale examinations in the interpretative and critical tradition. Throughout the discussion, the notions of religious community and authority will be revisited and reconsidered to highlight major developments and divergences, particularly with the latest appropriation of digital and social networking technologies within contemporary convergent media culture. This chapter will then close with a discussion of a dialectical perspective on religion and the Internet, which identifies key tensions that mediate our understanding of religious community and authority.

### **Click, Pray, Love: Surveying the religion and American Internet landscape**

A review of the literature reveals that the functionalist approach was significant in raising attention to the rising phenomenon of religious Internet use in the earlier phase of Internet research, with attendant use of large scale survey studies conducted on the American population. The functionalist approach draws primarily from the social scientific tradition, with foundations in socio-psychological perspectives (Martin and Nakayama 1999). Religion here is viewed as a variable and is defined a priori usually by group membership or by individual practices. The relationship between the religion and

the Internet is usually analyzed by correlating quantitative statistics of socio-demographic and related cultural patterns (e.g. values like religiosity), with perceptions and attitudes toward the Internet as well as a range of online behaviors. Key findings are then typically extrapolated from a random sample to the American population.

In particular, studies conducted under the auspices of the Pew Internet and American Life project (Pew IALP) have been influential and cited widely in academic and popular press. The Pew IALP conventionally uses a daily tracking survey on Americans' use of the Internet, gathered through phone interviews among a representative sample of more than a thousand adults, aged 18 and older. In the last decade, several studies have specifically focused on religion, and more recent ones have incorporated a few religious related items in the study design.

Based on survey findings in 2001, one of the first reports entitled "Cyberfaith: How Americans pursue religion online" estimated that 25 percent of Internet users or some 28 million Americans, dubbed a class of "Religion Surfers" have used the Internet to access spiritual information and communicate with others about religion. The growing significance of the Internet for religious purposes was underscored by comparable analyzes which remarkably evidenced that more people have accessed spiritual information online than engaged in other activities perceived to be popular then, including banking, dating, auctions, gambling, stocktrading and phone calls online (Larsen 2001).

In terms of attitudes, a significant proportion of religious surfers thought that compared to offline resources, the Internet afforded them easier access to study materials (64 percent) and prayer and devotional materials (44 percent). Results also showed that

the most popular online religious activities were individually oriented and information seeking ones. “Most Religion Surfers treat the Net as a vast ecclesiastical library and they hunt for general spiritual information online. However, they also interact with friends and strangers as they swap advice and prayer support”. (Larsen 2001)

Several patterns of online and offline Internet connections were highlighted; (1) active online religious surfers tended to also be active offline faith participants, (2) religious converts tended to be more active surfers compared to those who remain in the religion they were raised, (3) religious minorities tended to be more active in using the Internet to meet others of affiliated faith identities and interest. In terms of comparison with the general American population, findings show that a higher proportion of the so-called Religion Surfers described their faith as “very strong”, attended weekly religious services, and participated in daily prayer and meditation.

A subsequent study released by the Pew IALP in 2004 entitled “Faith online”, showed a substantial increase in the number of online religious users or “Online Faithful”, up to 64% of the nation’s 128 million Internet users or an estimated nearly 82 million Americans who reported to have used the Internet for faith related activities. Popular online faith related activities included sending and receiving email with spiritual content (38%), exchanging religious holiday cards (35%), reading news related to religious happenings (32%), information seeking or exchanging of their own faith with others (28%) and seeking or exchanging information about the religious faiths of others (26%). (Hoover, Clark and Rainie 2004)

In line with the earlier report on “Religion Surfers”, the 2004 report on the “Online Faithful” concluded that “Faith related activity online is a supplement to, rather

than a substitute for offline religious life.” Findings showed that compared to other Internet users, the Online Faithful are more likely to attend church weekly, and describe themselves as evangelicals, a subgroup of Protestants. Findings also revealed that compared to other Internet users, the Online Faithful were more active online, accessing the Internet longer through broadband connections. A higher proportion of them was also reported to be women, middle-aged, college educated and are relatively well to do. (Hoover, Clark and Rainie 2004)

A third religiously focused study conducted by the Pew IALP fielded an online survey targeted at American congregations, believed then to be “the first extensive quantitative effort to discover how churches and synagogues in the United States use the Internet”. Although findings were not based on a representative sample of all US congregations (1309 Christian, Jewish and Unitarian Universalist congregations from 49 states responded), the broad ranging responses highlighted that “the Internet has become a vital force in many faith communities”. (Larsen 2000)

Overall, results showed that the majority of the respondents held a positive attitude toward the Internet, believing that the Internet has helped congregational life, strengthened members’ spiritual growth, and facilitated faith sharing and missions locally and worldwide. Questions on congregations’ use of the Internet showed that most utilized their website to encourage attendees (83%), post mission statements and faith declarations (77%), links to denomination and faith related sites (76%), links to educational and devotional material (60%), and post internal communication (56%). It was concluded that “one way communication features were more commonly used than two way, interactive features like program sign-ups (8%), discussions and online prayer

(3%) and fundraising (5%). Only 4% of websites reported to provide webcasts of their worship services”.

Out of the 471 ministers and rabbis who responded to the survey, a significant number of them utilized the Internet to seek information for their worship programs (87%), scriptural study (77%), devotional resources (72%), matters of doctrine (54%) and information on other denominations and faiths (57%).

As discussed, research conducted by the Pew IALP investigating the factors associated with religious Internet use and attitudes toward the Internet has produced a rich database of benchmark findings, with implications for religious community and authority. Results have identified new, emerging groups of Internet users, for example, the “Religious Surfers” and “Online Faithful”. Findings have principally concluded that millions in the American population have embraced positive views about the Internet for religious and spiritual purposes, and that Internet use, particularly information seeking ones, augment Americans’ existing faith practices. These results broadly show that religious believers accept the Internet for spiritual purposes and utilize it to complement their local and existing religious community practices, with little threat of this new media displacing established authorities and structures.

Yet this complementary attitudinal and participation picture is not monolithically reflected in all survey inquiries on religion and the Internet. A survey on American youths conducted by Barna research group (1998) reported that one in six teens expected to use the Internet as a substitute for church-based religious experience within the next five years. Another survey by the Barna group which found that 8 percent of adults and



12 percent of teens used the Internet for religious purposes also postulated significant changes to the American church as more Internet users spend more time online (2001).

In addition, various communication scholars have applied the tenets of “Secularization Theory” to posit a significant negative relationship between religion and mass media, as the media is perceived to be aligned with the values of modern, secular society (Buddenbaum and Stout, 1996). For instance, secularization theory has been used to explain how religious adherence may negatively predict older media use such as newspaper reading and television viewing since people allegedly turn away from media that are perceived to be incompatible with their beliefs (e.g. Buddenbaum 1986; Hamilton and Rubin 1992). This theory has been applied to newer digital media. For example, a secondary analysis of data collected on a representative sample of Americans via telephone surveys in 1997 & 1998, revealed a negative relationship between religiosity and Internet use. Armfield and Holbert (2003) argued that their regression analysis showed that “the more religious an individual is, the less likely he or she will use the Internet” (p. 139), given the ethos that “Internet largely embodies a more secular worldview” (p. 136) although religiosity was a relatively weak, negative predictor of Internet use (incremental  $R^2=.02\%$  of the total variance) after demographics were controlled. In other words, it could have been noted that the bulk of the variance in the analyses concerning Internet adoption, perception, and use was accounted for by traditional socio-demographic factors.

Besides secularization theory and its extensions, another theory that has been applied to the functionalist analysis of religion and the Internet is the “Uses and Gratifications theory”. Consistent with a psychological communication perspective, the

uses and gratifications model in media research posits that audience members have certain needs or drives that are satisfied by connecting to various media, which explain their media choices and consequences. These needs (or gratifications) are typically factors derived from exploratory analyses in large scale surveys of media use. Past studies have identified several factors why people connect to electronic broadcast media, including their need for cognition, companionship and relaxation. With regard to religious television, past studies have identified other factors like avoidance (of violent and sexual material), faith building, relaxation and habit, which are linked to media use. In the same paradigm, Laney (2005) conducted a study to investigate the motivations for religious website, using an electronic questionnaire to survey online Christian web users (912 self selected responses from 49 states in America, Puerto Rico, Guam and the District of Columbia, as well as 21 other countries). Via exploratory factor analysis to summarize the results of the open ended responses, he found four main factors to account Christian website use which were labeled “religious entertainment and information” (e.g. for positive and uplifting messages), “reaction” (e.g. to contribute monetarily to the website ministry), “faith” (e.g. to explore futile and reinforce personal beliefs) and “alternative” items (e.g. my beliefs influence my selection of program content). The study concluded that a significant relationship exists between those seeking reinforcement for their personal motives and beliefs, and their Christian website use, suggesting that “faith” is an underlying motive for web users in search of religious web gratifications. (p.178)

After 2004, there have been few large scale survey studies dedicated specifically to studying religion and the Internet, although some recent Pew reports have included a

few items related to religious Internet use and analyzed online participation broadly across the American population. In “Generations 2010”, a report comparing how different generations of American adults used the Internet (Zickuhr 2010) highlighted that 32 % of adults surveyed in 2010 used the Internet to look for religious information, with a slightly higher percentage of Millennials (those from 18-33 years) and Generation X (34 -45 years) using the Internet for this purpose than the older groups. In a more recent report drawn from a representative survey conducted in 2010, Rainie, Purcell and Smith (2011) in “The Social side of the Internet” concluded that generally most Americans were “purposeful” in their civic, social and religious group life involvement, and 40% of adults reported that they were active in religious or spiritual organizations. In terms of technology use, Internet users (41%) are more likely than non-users to be active, those who are wirelessly connected and cell users (42% & 51%) were more likely than non-users (38% and 37%) to be active online respectively. With regard to social media, however, a slightly smaller proportion of social networking users (39%) and Twitter users (36%) were likely to be engaged in church, religious and spiritual groups (40%). In line with the previous findings on attitudes toward digital media, it was found that “Americans express generally positive views” on the “Internet’s impact” on social, civic and religious groups, with many who expressed that the Internet has a “major impact” on the ability of groups to communicate with their members (68%), draw attention to issues (67%), connect with other groups (60%), impact society (59%), and raise money (52%).

This expanded repertoire of interactive online activities may be facilitated by some religious organizations’ enthusiastic adoption of the Internet for their outreach and community building efforts, including media campaigns intended to address certain

topical or controversial issues or to spread particular messages. A recent example is the 2011 “I’m a Mormon” media initiative by the Church of the Latter Day Saints, which used television spots, radio advertisements, billboards and bus signs in various cities in America, with different young, diverse and energetic people proclaiming their Mormon identity. In New York City for instance, two forty foot billboards were erected in Times Square and hundreds of advertisements were mounted on top of cabs, subway stations and bus shelters. These ads directed viewers to [www.Mormon.org](http://www.Mormon.org), where they can view video vignettes of Mormons sharing their life stories and search for other information related to Mormonism (Kaleem, June 22, 2011). Another example of the use of multimedia by religious institutions is the Seattle chapter of the Islamic circle of North America, a New York-based nonprofit organization. Local Muslims contributed to the campaign, which ran ads on the sides of Metro buses, directing viewers to a toll-free number and website which presented information about Islam from the perspectives of American Muslims (Tu, September 15, 2008)

For a more detailed and large scale examination of religious organizations’ use of the Internet, Thumma and Travis (2007) report a multiyear study of American megachurches (defined as Protestant churches which average two thousand or more in attendance during their weekend services), drawing from their survey of 406 churches (with email and paper questionnaires mostly completed by their leaders). Their analysis highlighted that “the use of webbased technologies to share the sermons and other teaching components with attendees and non-attendees has exploded in recent years” with online resources like digitally recorded sermons and video footage replacing tape and CD based sermon series (p.164). They also found that almost all these megachurches (96

percent) maintain a website about their church. Churches which were categorized as “new wave” multi-sited organizations, founded after the 1990s, with relatively young leading ministers, were found to have the most extensive websites with special sections for members, broadcast of services and messages via web and podcast.

As shown above, functionalist survey studies have made important contributions to our understanding of Americans’ (including religious believers) attitudes toward the Internet and the role of newer digital media for a variety of faith related practices. These studies heighten our awareness of the need to recognize the fast growth and influential role that the Internet plays among religious Americans and illustrates a productive avenue of research to associate and possibly predict patterns of attitudes and behaviors among subsets of the American population. Taken together, these studies confirm the importance of Internet use to supplement and augment existing religious community life, providing opportunities to widen and deepen engagement with others, with more recent studies evidencing the employment of a larger variety of digital and social media to interact with other faith believers, alongside affirming beliefs of the Internet’s positive “impact” on religiously related activities and bonds. However, it should be acknowledged that cross sectional surveys are not designed to produce causal and longitudinal overtime observations on religion and the Internet. In précis, there are a multitude of ways of conceiving the notion of “Internet use”, beyond categorical frequency scales or standard self reported hours of usage, which tend not to measure intensity or underlying meanings and viewers’ circumstantial and situated reception of their online experiences. Notably, in the Pew congregational study, Buddhism, Muslim and Hindu congregations were absent from the analysis, pointing to the need for more comprehensive research among (fast

growing) minority religions in America in this area. In addition, as representative survey studies focused on religion and the Internet were conducted in earlier phase of the (pre 2004) Internet where the information seeking paradigm was dominant, there is a need for more contemporary large scale studies on emerging social and locative mobile media to update our picture of religion and American Internet use.

### **The interplay of religion and the Internet: Emerging ties and networks**

Another approach to studying religion and the Internet draws from the interpretative paradigm, which is concerned with understanding the world as it is, and describing the subjective, creative communication of individuals, usually using qualitative research methods (Martin & Nakayuma 1999). Religion is generally seen as socially constructed, culturally embedded, and emergent, rather than defined a priori, and is not limited to traditional or mainstream beliefs and practices.

In the earlier phase of interpretative research, the relationship between religion and the Internet was seen as more disjunct, with online religion perceived to be a separate, even transgressive sphere. In more recent developments, a growing corpus of scholarship has acknowledged the intimate, and mostly harmonious relationships between online and offline religion, where synergetic and new ties and networks are constructed and enacted through communication. (see for e.g. the special issue on Religion and the Internet: Considering the online-offline connection in *Information, Communication and Society* (2011), edited by Heidi Campbell and Mia Lovheim).

Within the global academe, there are a significant and growing number of interpretative studies investigating the digitally mediated aspects of religion. To date, at

least three anthologies on this subject has been published, a) *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices, Futures* (edited by Pauline Hope Cheong, Peter Fischer-Nielsen, Stefan Gelfgren, & Charles Ess, 2012, New York & Oxford: Peter Lang), b) *Religion and Cyberspace* (edited by Morten Hojsgaard & Marjit Warburg, 2005, London & New York: Routledge) and c) *Religion online: Finding faith on the Internet* (edited by Lorne Dawson & Douglas Cowan, 2004, New York: Routledge). These volumes provide in-depth examinations of newer religious communities online, including virtual communities and digital worlds, emergent mediated religiously affiliated practices, and the appropriation of online resources and infrastructures by established religious traditions and organizations. Among these, there are several studies that are more closely related (and traceable) to the American context.

One subset of these studies examined the earlier adoption and appropriation of the Internet for the building of virtual and diasporic community, particularly among members of new religions in the United States. For example, MacWilliams (2005) investigated the Branch Davidians, headquartered in Waco, Texas, and their affiliated Internet sites. Amidst the ongoing debate on the ontological validity of “virtual community”, he argued that “cyberspace offers a symbolically real space in which religious communities can imaginatively dwell” (p. 182). His descriptive analysis of a variety of Waco websites illustrated how these websites helped form a virtual community by creating personal relationships to challenge government and mainstream representations, as well as by providing a common place to articulate sacred visions and preserve the spiritual legacy of their compound “Mount Carmel” which was infiltrated by the police and their leader, David Koresh, who was eventually killed in a raid. In this way, it was proposed that

religious “community, though perhaps tenuous and fragile, is maintained through the ‘non-place’ of the Internet.”(p. 193)

In another example, Berger & Ezzy (2004) proposed that cyberspace serves as both a community and a source of information for teenage witches in the United States and Australia. Their interviews with 23 American teenagers showed that these youths utilized the Internet as an “alternative encyclopedia” for information about rituals, herbs and witchcraft magic, and also as a locale to experiment with their identities as witches, and meet others through online training programs, chatrooms, and forums. Their research showed that active online engagement in witch-craft related virtual communities strengthened the sense of belonging experienced by young witches to other diasporic members. Accordingly, it was argued that instead of “causing identity fragmentation, participation in the Internet may actually be facilitating identity integration under the conditions of late modernity, in which relationships are increasingly dispersed geographically, and temporally and identity is always in the process of transformation.” (p. 186) In addition, it was also highlighted that the anonymity and convenience afforded by Internet use provided teenage witches the opportunity to bypass traditional authority, in this case, elder disapproval of their interest in witchcraft. In this way, it was argued that “for young witches who fear parental hostility toward their religion, the Internet can provide a hidden community away from their parents” (p. 183)

A more recent approach to digital religious community examines the joint, even synergetic nature of the online-offline representations and activities. This weaving of online and offline pathways of faith is in keeping with the wider body of scholarship on Internet studies, which has deemphasized the sole focus on investigating online



phenomenon in favor of a broader scope which examines digital technologies embedded in offline geographies and the temporal rhythms of peoples' everyday lives (Cheong and Ess 2012; Ess and Convalso 2011).

For instance, Scholz, Selge, Stille & Zimmerman (2008) discussed how the joint efforts of the Muslim radio station *MeccaOne* located in San Francisco and a private Islamic school, *Zaytuna Institute*, in Hayward, California, produced podcasts and videocasts that were part of an overall communication and media spectrum used by these Muslim groups to disseminate teachings that reinforced their existing power and authority structures. They illustrated how multiple webcasts constructed particular modes of pedagogy (e.g. tapings of Islamic conferences or teaching sessions) that emphasized the knowledge of the institution's founders that have been recognized and validated in the context of renowned teaching institutions, thereby legitimating their religious authority as represented in newer media. Given that the Muslim community in North America formed the major audience of these podcasts, this case study pointed out instances of cultural and religiously related adaption of the podcasts as they were created in the style of "humorous, sometimes even iconic speech mode" which draws from "Western pop culture", combined with advice regarding leading "a good Islamic life". It is also noted that the videocasts featured many recognizable visual elements in the real world, like the placement of speakers and actors in "Oriental" settings dressed in Islamic garb, to further the credibility of its digital media outreach and distance education efforts, by reinforcing traditional markers of Islamic expertise in which medial representations helped to reconstruct their religious authority online.

In another example, Hutchings (2011) in his multiyear, ethnographic study of Internet-based Christian communities known as “online churches” argued that these churches exemplify a “new kind of loosely networked religious practice that blends local and online resources, practices and connections, offering digital forms of education, spiritual experience and social ties that generally complement local church membership rather than replacing it.” (pg) One of his case studies focused on *Church Online*, an “online campus” launched by the Oklahoma-based multisite megachurch, LifeChurch.Tv, in the United States in 2006. Unlike earlier manifestations of virtual spiritual community that were primarily fueled by text based discourse and emoticons, “Church Online” serves as an interesting exemplar of the contemporary multimodal Internet since it offers a wide array of audio, visual and textual resources and even the potential for online users to participate via three dimensional avatar representations in the digital world, Second Life. Viewers can participate in ‘live prayer’ chatrooms, watch streaming videocasts of services, post pre-scripted invitations to Facebook, Twitter or Myspace and connect to Church Online’s Facebook for frequently posted updates and promotional trailers for its upcoming programs.

Overall, his research found support for the supplementary relationship on online and offline community where the “majority of online churchgoers” are also long time church attendees. Specifically, it was observed that local community life was supported by online activities. Moreover, the authority of the lead pastor appeared to be constantly reinforced by exhortative chatroom discourse which is “dominated by evangelical believers who tolerate no disagreement with the preacher.” (p. 1127) And in turn, his interview data suggested that dynamic social media communication expressed via

identifiable congregational members' social media profiles, helped integrate congregational discourse and their daily online activities.

This constant connectivity or what Cheong called “ambient religion communication” is further underscored with a study on Twitter and its diverse appropriation by various American congregations. Twitter, which allows users to engage in composing brief multimedia updates, and sending them via web-based applications like text messaging, instant messaging, email, or on the web, can be studied as a form of “religious microblogging”, linking faith believers via frequent updates or bursts of spiritually related information (Cheong 2010). For instance, some believers have appropriated Twitter for personal and communal prayer and rituals to help us understand how dimensions of “bonding social capital” are built and maintained within religious communities (Cheong and Poon 2008) as well as faith-oriented interactants on social networks. For instance, various individuals and organizations are setting up prayer feeds on Twitter that feature daily prayer requests, as exemplified by popular faith related hashtags like #twurch (Twitter + church), #prayer, #JIL (Jesus is Lord) and #pray4 (as in, #pray4 my children). Several organizations like the Calvin Institute of Worship in Michigan have also set up an automated Tweeter feeds to “pray the hours”, where users can sign up to receive hourly prayers sent in verses as brief tweets or via a Tweetgrid ([www.tweetgrid.com](http://www.tweetgrid.com)) with a dashboard of all prayer feeds across different topics to prompt continuous prayer or aid in intercessory meditations. As such, believers may reinvent the century old practice of praying set prayers from the Bible, hymns and devotionals. This also links historically to the Pentecostal religious practice of “prayer

chains”, where lay followers are charged to pray for particular persons or on specific topics, following a synchronized schedule (Cheong 2012).

Hence, religious tweets can affirm religious community building, to spur sharing of ideas and prayer exchange to build deeper relationships among laity. Religious organizations can also use Twitter to re-enact historical religious events, to help initiate attention and reflection on traditional practices and religious holidays. For example, the Wall Street’s Trinity Church in New York employed microblogging to recreate Christ’s final hours in a Twitter enactment of the Passion Play (<http://twitter.com/twspassionplay>) where followers of *twspassionplay* received tweets from the main characters: Mary, Joseph, a serving girl, Peter, Pontius Pilate and, Jesus. It is noteworthy that in this case, the tweeted Passion Play was part of the larger church programming for Easter, which included both online and face to face meetings. Visitors to the church’s website were notified of the church’s multiple religious service times but were also invited to explore an online “Stations of the Cross”, where they could interactively click on a mosaic of black and white photos of a recent staging of the Stations of the Cross in Manhattan to reveal scriptural passages, prayers, and meditative music (Cheong 2012).

Therefore, in contemporary times, an increasingly number of officials within religious organizations may need to and be motivated or compelled to work with digital technologies in the management of the church. Drawing from their interviews with 13 Protestant ministers in the metro-Atlanta area, Grinter, Wyche, Hayes & Harvel (2011) report findings on the use of technological systems in church management, worship, pastoral care and outreach. They found that ministers perceived virtual services to be “inappropriate” and all of their interviewees irrespective of denominations, were reported

to be “uniformly interested” in using the Internet to manage their church community and pastoral care, for example, by sending electronic prayer requests and using email to coordinate visitations to laity. Overall, they highlighted both new developments and constraints with Internet use for community building, as “technology simultaneously supported and complicated the collaborations required to retain and grow their church community”, yet ministers chose to “experiment” with the Internet “because of their ability to sustain, reinforce and grow their church (laity & ministry collectively) community.” (p.2). In addition, with regard to authority, they highlighted how traditional religious leadership is affirmed and their legitimacy is sustained in the face of new media. “Ministers made decisions about the appropriateness of ICTs [information communication technologies] not just for themselves, but also for their laity. And they used their position as a leader, and opportunities to speak explicitly to their laity about what constituted appropriate ICT use.” (p.12) It was also pointed out that “ministers created a theologically based code of good ICA conduct for their laity” and stressed about the positive use of technology as “being blessed, thus connecting it to being faithful.” (p.12) In these ways, multiple aspects of Internet use were found to be incorporated in clergy work to fuel the spiritual development of their congregation.

Consequently, in light of today’s convergence culture and the multiplatform Internet (Jenkins, 2006), leaders and managers of religious organizations appear to be developing new competencies to connect interactively across a spectrum of older and newer digital media to reach congregational members and seekers (Cheong, 2011a). Such “strategic arbitration” entails Internet use to facilitate the co-creation of information and expertise such that they do not destabilize the organization. Instead, clergy may utilize

social media to enhance and promote their teachings, start new media outreach activities, in order to legitimate their authority and reinforce the normative regulation of their organizations (Cheong, Huang & Poon, 2011a). Coming back to the opening example of religious apps, it is significant that electronic gadgetry and communication that were once considered distracting or deviant in sacred places, are now increasingly incorporated into religious services, as in the case of churches who post congregational members' tweets on the screen behind the preaching pastor during worship services. In addition, it is pertinent to highlight that the YOUversion Bible app was created, not by private individuals or enterprises but under the auspices of Lifechurch, in collaboration with other established Christian ministries. In this way, Bible apps, with attendant endorsements from clergy and congregational members, may help reinforce extant organizational practices that are governed by traditional authorities bound within church or temple spaces (Cheong, 2011b).

In the same vein, Cheong & Ess (2012) argued how newly released apps like the Confession app, will not blight the authority of the Catholic Church. In the introduction chapter of the anthology *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture*, they noted that "...it is enormously significant that [the] Confession [app] is not marketed as a complete and virtual replacement for a central rite in the Roman Catholic tradition. Rather, the *Confession* advert carefully points out that "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."...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 local church.” (p. 1)

As the above examples show, the value of interpretative studies lies in the in-depth descriptions which provide a nuanced, complex and fluid picture of online interactants’ experiences with digital religion. As such, they complement the functionalist approach with studies that tend to yield a broader, more stable description of the relationships between religion and the Internet. As noted above, interpretative studies can help uncover new and emerging expressions of faith online, and examine how interactants respond and understand the meaning of their lived experiences online and within the context of their offline ties, networks and interactions with established authorities. While the nascent phase of studies on virtual community focused on participation and activities restricted to cyberspace, more recent investigations have incorporated a wider spectrum of online interactions that is embedded in local houses of worship, in line with the burgeoning adoption of the Internet and its contemporary mobile, wireless and multimodal capabilities. Interestingly, emerging research on religious avatars in digital worlds show that even avatars seem to prefer community as rooted in real world locales and practices (Straarup 2012). Hence, these studies have shown that online engagement is not a zero-sum game, causing members to forfeit local realities. Instead, together with a growing number of studies worldwide investigating a diverse range of religious communities, for example Buddhist communities in Asia (e.g. Cheong, Huang and Poon, 2011b, Fukamizu, 2007), Jewish communities in the Middle

East (e.g. Campbell, 2010), Muslims in Europe (e.g. Sisler, 2011), Internet connections may augment, even buttress online interactants to their local religious collectivities.

Further studies in this paradigm could further analyze religious and spiritual expressions in concatenative online-offline interactions that are related to a growing armature of digital technologies affiliated with the Internet of people as well as “the Internet of things”; the latter condition referring to infrastructures that integrate uniquely identifiable physical objects into information networks via virtual representations containing data on their identity, status, location and other relevant information (International Telecommunication Union, 2005). For example, although GODTube at one point, received much media attention as the fastest growing website in the US (Blodget, September 18, 2007), scarce research has been conducted to understand where, when and how the American population connects to religious videos, vlog networks, and what this means for religious communities, their privacy expectations and concerns, and the ways that they preserve traditional authorities and institutional practices. Similarly, beyond the most prolific and trafficked Protestant variants, more in-depth may shed light on the online growing presence of other kinds of social networking sites and its use by Americans. For example, *Muslimspace* is an Islamic social networking site founded in 2006 by Mohamed El-Falaty who was based in Finland, but the site claimed to have nearly 20,000 users, with the majority of users based in the Muslim minority context of the United States (Bunt 2009). There is also a need to probe the power dynamics that operate in online-offline religious discourse, congruent with larger historical and social forces- both of which are addressed by critical studies.



### **Critical outlooks: Religion and the online marketplace**

Studies in the critical paradigm share many of the same metatheoretical assumptions with the interpretive- an ontological assumption that reality is socially constructed and an emphasis on the voluntaristic characteristic of human behavior (Martin and Nakayuma 1999; Mumby 1997). Accordingly, religion is perceived to be culturally embedded. However, critical scholars emphasize that human (and religiously related) behaviors are constrained by societal ideological structures and material conditions that privilege some and disadvantage others. Accordingly, the Internet is not viewed as a neutral or benign technology but is identified as a site of struggle, where various communication meanings are contested within social hierarchies, and where post Internet adoption divides exist and intensify as they are enfolded in historical social stratification patterns (Van Dijk 2005). As such, critical studies often aim to examine and unveil systems of oppression and work for social change.

With regard to religion and the Internet, one body of literature focuses on marketing and branding issues, in the context of the larger capitalistic American society (and global economy), that is increasingly immersed in popular media, material objects and commercial artifacts. The creation of a religious marketplace is in part attributed to the phenomenon of the separation of church and state in the United States, where people being free to choose their religion/s, thus demanding that each church and its leadership create the most compelling worship experience or risk losing laity (Moore 1994). Einstein (2008) for example, highlighted from a marketing perspective, how the Internet accelerates the dissemination of religious content and provides “sales opportunities that are fast, customizable, and private.” (p. 34) The online environment is thereby portrayed

as fueling the growth of “faith brands”; a term which refers to “religious products and services that are part of a comprehensive, cohesive marketing plan to create a product that resonates with today’s consumer-conscious religious shopper.” (p.14) Drawing on a case study on Kabbalah, a spiritual practices based on Judaism with 27 centers in major cities including New York and Los Angeles, she described how the centre’s website was used to market the Kabbalah energy drink, a form of bottled Canadian spring water imputed with curative powers via the transference of blessings on it by the spiritual leader, Rav. Employed in concert with telemarketing strategies, the website was also used to disseminate emails with links to products for purchase via Amazon.com (e.g. a Kabbalah “starter kit”), and promote pricey Passover resort packages and holiday sales events with booths selling books, CDs and T-shirts. In this way, the Kabbalah faith brand coexists with commercial activities as a “brand community” (p. 86-98) because website users and participants of Kabbalah sales events and conferences, exhibited shared consciousness of their common connections, shared stories online and offline about their beliefs and practices, and fostered intimacy by volunteering to promote their services and products to others. She also presented examples of brand “humanizing icons” including Madonna for the Kabbalah Centre, and Joel Osteen and Rick Warren for megachurches in the United States, to stress how these organizations tailored their web content to consistently support their brand messages, as personified by these iconic leaders and as cross promoted in multiple media like bestselling books, mainstream media interviews and television programs.

The interactions between savvy marketing and the burgeoning growth of megachurch ministries in America are also examined by Lee and Sinitiere (2009). Their

archival text and observational analyses of five influential leaders or what they call “religious suppliers” in the religious marketplace and “evangelical innovators” (Joel Osteen, T.D. Jakes, Brian McLaren, Paula White and Rick Warren) focused on understanding the appeal of these leaders, which is subsequently explained by their capability to flexibly offer matching spiritual rewards to cater to the tastes and desires of American religious consumers. For instance, their analysis of the ministry of Bishop Jakes who pastors one of the largest African American congregations headquartered in Texas, in the United States, revealed how Bishop Jakes’s mass appeal involves his ability to produce highly theatrical and compelling worship experiences (which are televised and webcast), provide pragmatic and therapeutic sermons (content which are available in books and other print publications), sell spiritual commodities that creatively commodify spiritual messages (e.g. in the form of his own line of Hallmark cards, a Sacred love songs CD for Christian couples and Sony Picture films) and reach tens of thousands in face to face carnival-like gatherings like his “Mega Fest”.

Cheong (2011a) furthers these prior analyses of religious branding by examining how religious leaders are employing the latest forms of the Internet like social networking sites to extend their influence and reach. She discussed for example, how evangelical megachurch leader Rick Warren constructs his authority beyond showings in traditional media platforms by composing a weekly newsletter and by maintaining a Facebook and Twitter account with updates (occasionally in multiple languages) to more than 200,000 followers. Therefore, rather than be enervated by online discourse or debate, it appears in many ways that certain religious leaders may renegotiate their authority by circulating inspiring or religiously encoded communiqués, which may be

popularly attended to and virally reconstituted to generate attention to their work and social campaigns.

Explicating upon this convergence culture of digital technologies and the ability for online interactants to remix and virally spread religious content, Clark (2011) utilized the 'Actor-Network Theory', and mapped out ways in which social media technologies, peoples' experiences and the interest of commercial stakeholders interact to circulate religious symbols and practices "within the realm of commodities". Her analysis of the JK wedding embrace dance video which was initially enacted by a couple in St. Paul, Minnesota but whose surprise choreography was later uploaded onto Youtube, and then spread widely, spotlighted the significant role played by corporate leaders. Specifically, it was highlighted that Sony executives and brand managers of the artiste Chris Brown (who originally sang the song) intentionally promoted the video online, instead of taking it down for the infringement of copyright, in order to boost the popularity of Chris Brown, and earn revenue via attached advertisements on Youtube which promote to sell his songs. In this way, her study enlightens on the ways in which major media players might commercially gain from lay cultural productions, which are afforded by digital and social media's capabilities to create and remediate content, involving religious symbols and practices, to collectively engender social change, like fueling the personalization trend in American weddings and other similar religiously affiliated rituals.

In another instance of corporate intervention, with regard to the recent upsurge in religiously related apps, Cheong (2011b) pointed out how claims to proprietary ownership of the app platform and the ostensible need to keep the apps environment free of "objectionable religious content" were related to the Apple Corporation's recent

efforts to remove religiously related apps on its iTunes Apps stores. In November 2010, Apple revoked an app developed for Christians to review “the Manhattan Declaration” and sign on their support for a few key social issues, including a commitment to the sanctity of life and traditional marriage from their mobile devices. The app blockage was reportedly due to complains lodged by groups who viewed the app as offensive to homosexual inclinations and conduct. This example illustrates how to some extent, Apple retains the discretion to determine which religious ideas are allowed in the pluralistic web sphere (Parshall 2011). This latest gatekeeping function accordingly brings up dynamic complexities in the social media environment since influential media companies who dominate e-commerce sites, may engineer, constrain, and even censor access to the religious content of minority or disfranchised groups, particularly those which appear to be contentious or challenge their interests (and bottom line).

Hence, among critical commentary on social media and religion is the thematic concern of how the increasingly commercialized environments of Web 2.0 and proprietary social networking sites interact with our expectations and uses of the Internet. In some instances, this predicament leads not only to our giving away data of commercial interests but more fundamentally to our collaborating in processes of commodifying ourselves and identities according to marketable profiles and taste segments, while pursuing more personalized and interactive digital media experiences (Cheong and Ess 2012). Furthermore, the use of mobile and locative media may affect our individual and collective ability to communicate religious content freely (and without reprisal), in light of increasingly technically opaque information systems like so-called smart phones that use GPS technology to connect to mobile networks but also, involuntary update our

physical location (as in the practice of collecting our locational data in hidden files, ostensibly for the purposes of greater efficiency).

Given the rising popularity of social media and the growing convergence media culture, there is a need for more critical voices in debates on faith brands, alongside detailed analyses of related economic and cultural developments in the religious marketplace. Although there are rarely empirical verifications of the perverse or negative effects of religious marketing and promotion online (indeed, organizational growth is often celebrated as a positive consequence of faith branding), further critical theorization of the evolving roles of religious leaders and their motivations and the communicative behaviors of related influential stakeholders, can help illuminate how various kinds of pressures and rewards can diminish some or help privilege others who are influenced by corporate ideologies. Future studies could thus examine the ways in which the online religious marketplace is more compatible with some faith traditions than others, and what it is about different religious traditions that either encourages or restricts these capitalistic-oriented practices.

#### Considering Tensions and Paradoxes: Dialectics in religion and the Internet

This chapter has thus far articulated and illustrated various relationships between religion and the Internet, as examined in studies pursued under different paradigms and methodologies. As discussed above, it is interesting to observe that Internet connections entail multiple opportunities, uneven gains and conflicting tensions in religious information seeking, community building and authority practices. Therefore, beyond the aforementioned three main paradigms, a meta-theoretical framework like the dialectical

perspective may help further understanding of the complex dynamics between religion and the Internet.

A dialectical perspective to digital media and culture recognizes the simultaneous presence of two relational forces of interaction. It recognizes and accepts as ordinary, the interdependence and complementary aspects of the seeming opposites, in light of prior propositions that the very nature of the Internet itself is paradoxical, liberating and dominating, empowering and fragmenting, universalizing but non-totalizing (Cheong, Martin and Macfadyen 2012). With regard to new media developments, thinking dialectically about religion and the Internet helps identify the central tensions and multiple independent links that are characteristic of what Schement and Stephenson (1996) noted as the “unavoidable frictions” and “endemic tensions” in mediated religious practice, including tensions and paradoxes in religious community and authority.

An understanding of these relational tensions and paradoxes is important since utopic and dystopic claims to notions of community and authority often accompany the rise of any new medium of communication (Wellman 2011), not least the Internet and recent social media which have been prominently promoted as part of, if not the cause of, social revolutions. As reflected in the opening quote in this chapter, the interactivity of the Internet is generally assumed to herald unprecedented change, where “the young simply move in as actor rather than as audience; participation today is a universal pattern in which the audience becomes active.” (McLuhan 1999, 84) With the rising popularity of social media, the capacity of users to respond to, tag, create and reticulate online materials of their own, is often claimed to lead us toward greater freedom of expression, grassroots participation in the direction of equality and democracy, which alters the

nature of religious community and authority. Indeed, as various aforementioned studies in this chapter have pointed out, online religious users may purposefully utilize the Internet to construct new and virtual ties, strengthen existing relations and reconstruct older bonds. At the same time, however, as several other studies highlighted here have suggested, the development of the religious use of the Internet is often embedded in local practices and infrastructures, under the jurisdiction of local authorities and even corporate interests.

Thus, a paradox in the expansion or globalization of mediated religious community is that it often necessarily entails the fostering of local ties. These ties may simultaneously encompass communal rituals and face to face meetings, even while churches and temples provide more opportunities for individualized practices of consuming religious resources online as they establish and grow their digital presence. Another paradox in the construction of religious authority involves the complex processes that follow on religious leaders adopting digital and social media, which initially provides their members with alternative resources to challenge traditional hierarchies. Yet these same resources may be appropriated by clergy to serve as a source of education for their laity as their legitimacy is enhanced when leaders move beyond dictatorial instruction to mentorship practices that influence the mediation and interpretation of religious texts, as well as multimedia publishing of their own (and branded) religious materials. Therefore, what may be interesting to further explore in future research are hybridized and relational notions of religious community and authority (Cheong and Ess 2012), which conjoins understandings of online-offline,



sacred-secular, modernist-postmodernist cultures, reflecting the dialectics of personal-contextual, static-dynamic and privilege-disadvantage realities.

In closing, understanding the dialectics of the intertwined and fluid religion and the Internet is a multifaceted and challenging, developing field of study, requiring sustained and dedicated attention. Particularly so it is in our time, as Marshall McLuhan reminds us, of the need to be vividly aware of the stimulating developments in religion, given the speed of change and multiplicitous flows of religious symbols, practices and interactions.

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