

# Internet and Religion

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Since the 1980s, there has been a steady rise in the performance and practice of religion within online environments. Starting with the formation of religious sub-groups on Usenet and email-based religious communities, a diversity of forms of religious engagement began to emerge and catch the attention of the media and academic world. Some examples include the creation of virtual temples or churches and sites of online spiritual pilgrimage (for a detailed review see Campbell, 2006). By the mid-1990s, scholars began to take serious notice and explore the development of these unique social-spiritual practices related to the Internet, and to speculate on the potential impact of importing offline religious beliefs and practices online. In the past decade, we have seen even more innovative and novel examples of religion spring up online from “godcasting” (religious podcasting) to religious versions of popular mainstream websites, such as Godtube.com to online worship spaces in *Second Life* for Christians, Muslims, and Jews. This chapter provides a critical review of the study of religion online, emphasizing how research on religion and the Internet has become an interdisciplinary area of study. It synthesizes previous research on religion and the Internet, and highlights one particular area at the focus of my own work: online religious communities. By focusing on how the study of religious community online has developed since the 1990s, this chapter demonstrates a progressive refinement of research themes, methods, and questions related to religion online. Furthermore, the chapter suggests how future studies of religion online may need to develop.

The development of this research area can be seen in terms of maturing research questions and methods that can be framed in terms of three phases or “waves” of research. This provides a framework for understanding how religious community has been studied online in the past decade, advancing along with the further discoveries and developments in the field of Internet research. In each wave of research, the common themes and implications of these findings related to the study of religious community online are highlighted. Finally, this chapter addresses areas that have been neglected in research, and suggests

issues and questions that would be fruitful for further exploration in relation to religion online.

## Mapping Three Waves of Research

While a growing body of literature is accumulating around religion and Internet studies, the interdisciplinary focus within studies of religion and the Internet has meant in some respects this area remains a disparate collection of ideas and approaches. O'Leary & Brasher's (1996) article, "The Unknown God of the Internet," provided a foundational overview of how religion began to be influenced and manifested in online environments. This was followed by the landmark article, "Cyberspace as sacred space" (1996), where O'Leary, details the emergence of religion online by identifying how online rituals perform an important function, enabling users to import their religious sensibilities online. These articles marked the starting point for serious academic inquiry into religious engagement on the Internet and led to a decade of diverse research. These ranged from focused studies investigating the connections between online and offline religious practice, such as a study of prayer in a multi-user virtual reality environment by Schroeder and colleagues (1998), to large-scale studies of user behavior patterns such as those undertaken by the Pew Internet and American Life Project *Wired Churches, Wired Temples* (Larsen, 2000) and *CyberFaith* (Larsen, 2001), which provided empirical evidence about the religious use of the Internet. A decade after the publication of *Cybersociety* (Jones, 1995), that earmarked the birth of Internet studies, Baym in a special issue of *The Information Society* (2005) highlights the fact that religion online has become a valid part of the emerging field and a dimension in need of more attention (Campbell, 2005c).

Since 2000, three key edited collections on religion online have been produced which highlight the diversity of research topics and approaches related to new expressions of religious practice seen in networked computer technologies. The first edited collection was *Religion on the Internet – Research Prospects and Promise* (Cowan & Hadden, 2000), bringing together early studies of researchers in the above-mentioned disciplines in an attempt to mark out the Internet's new sphere for studying religion. In this volume, Dawson stated "sociology of cyberspace, let alone religion on-line, is still in its infancy" (2000, p. 49). This links the research of religion online to similar struggles being faced by those taking an interdisciplinary approach to study of life online in the mid-1990s. In many respects, the study of religion online followed a similar path to Internet studies, beginning with simple research topics and basic questions which attempted simply to describe what was happening online. These approaches likewise had to be refined over time as the research matured. Dawson and Cowan (2004), in the second edited collection, state that the first studies on religion in cyberspace veered towards "utopian and dystopian extremes," mirroring the speculative nature of many of the first works published on the social impact of the Internet. As Internet studies began

to come into its own field in the late 1990s with substantial empirical studies emerging, religion too began to receive more serious reflection. Yet in Dawson and Cowan's assessment the study of "how religion is being practiced online is only just beginning." They emphasize a need to "understand developments online in the context of wider social and cultural conditions changing life in later-modern societies" (p. 9).

In the most recent of these collections, Hojsgaard & Warburg (2005) provide a helpful but brief typology which identifies three waves of research related to the academic study of religion on the Internet (pp. 8–9). The imagery of a wave is used to show how particular research questions and foci moved scholars in a particular direction, and eventually gave rise to new areas of focus. This development also illustrates how the study of religious communities online has correlated with the overall growth of Internet studies, with progressive changes occurring in the questions asked, methods used, and topics pursued.

Hojsgaard and Warburg describe the first wave of research on religion online as focusing on the new and extraordinary aspects of cyberspace, where religion "could (and probably would) do almost anything" (p. 8). The Internet is seen as a tool and symbol for religious and social transformation. Initial interest in many studies was in how this new technology created possibilities for new religions, or at least provided practitioners the possibility of reinventing traditional religious practices online. As Brasher states, the Internet "reconfigures the content of what we do and redefines who we are" (2001, p. 4). First-wave studies in the 1990s were often overly utopian or dystopian in their views; the Internet was seen as either building religious solidarity or potentially destroying traditional religiosity. Many of these early studies were focused on a single case study – a specific online community, website, or other online environment – and were highly descriptive, seeking to simply define the range of religious practices and phenomena online (Hennerby & Dawson, 1999; Davis, 1998).

The second wave, as Hojsgaard & Warburg describe it, was built on early descriptive studies but moved towards a "more realistic perspective" by seeking to more concretely define and compare different forms of online religious phenomena. Researchers began to understand that it was not simply the technology, but rather people who were generating these new forms of religious expression online. Researchers began to put their findings on topics such as online community and identity construction within a broader and more critical perspective, thus drawing on sociological, political, and philosophical debates and research related to community and identity in general. An important contribution in this area was Helland's (2000) popular distinction between religion-online (importing traditional forms of religion and religious practice online) and online-religion (adapting religion to create new and interactive forms of networked spirituality). This distinction has been employed by many researchers seeking to distinguish forms of religion in online environments. There is also a marked movement in the second-wave studies to try to link findings related to online religion with offline developments in religious structures and identification. For example, a special

symposium issue of *Religion* (2002), describing itself as “a second wave of academic studies” on religion online, and building on the work of Brasher and O’Leary (1996), Wertheim (1999), and Zaleski (1996), sought to categorize and begin to theorize about the changing shape of religion in a wired world, as well to inaugurate “a new-sub-field of religious studies” (MacWilliams, 2002, p. 277).

As research questions and methodologies have begun to further mature, Hojsgaard and Warburg surmise that a third wave of research “may be just around the corner” (p. 9). They describe this research as a “bricolage of scholarship coming from different backgrounds with diverse methodological preference” (p. 9). Third-wave research thus will be marked by more collaborative, longitudinal, and interdisciplinary explorations of religion online. One example of this is Laney’s (2005) study of application of uses and gratifications theory in order to determine the relationship between personal motive or desires and Christian website usage. This is also exemplified by the work of the University of Colorado’s Center for Mass Media and Religion, which has taken a lead in investigating how the Internet acts as “symbolic or meaning resource” used by spiritual seekers in contemporary society for religious orientation and formation practices (Hoover & Park, 2004). If newer studies such as these of religion online are indicative of what is to come, we can expect to see a sharper turn towards theoretical and interpretive scholarship. We will see individual, focused studies seeking to relate their findings to other research in an effort to further analyze the implications of life online for wider society, and to provide grounds constructing theoretical frameworks to aid in these interpretations. Third-wave studies will also seek to demonstrate how studies of religion online add unique insights and help contribute to the overall understanding of life in a global information society.

Hojsgaard and Warburg’s description of the “state of the field” in terms of waves of research illustrates how religion and the Internet can be seen as an evolving area of study, and one in need of continued mapping. It is important to note that these waves imply a process. Each wave or phase of research moves forward with a distinctive approach informed by a certain set of cultural and social perceptions about the research topic it is studying (i.e. how the Internet is perceived and understood at that moment). As knowledge is gained so is impetus; the research wave gathers information until a critical mass moves it towards a peak and then a breakpoint. At the breakpoint, some questions fall away and insufficient approaches or methods fall aside. Yet instead of the wave completely disappearing, the knowledge gained creates new momentum and gives birth to another wave which is pushed forward by a new set of questions and refined approaches. One wave of research gives rise to the next. Yet this is not to say that researchers not involved in the initial waves of research of religion online are excluded from future exploration. Rather, this is a helpful image to show how the area has moved forward from focus on the descriptive and definitional, to developing typologies and comparisons, to entering a phase focused on theory and interpretation. As new technologies and religious trends emerge online, it is likely that this will require

further waves or phases of research to emerge in order to map, contextualize, and analyze the implication of these occurrences.

Using the image of a wave provides a helpful attempt to describe in more detail how different questions and approaches have arisen and been carried forward in the past decade of research on religion and the Internet. This sets the stage to investigate how one key area within studies of religion and the Internet community has been approached. Focusing on the study of religious community online allows us to highlight the questions that have been addressed and those still unanswered that relate to the study of religion online.

### **“First-Wave” Research on Religion and the Internet**

As stated above, first-wave studies of religion and the Internet were highly descriptive and focused on identifying and defining the latest religious practices online. Like ethnographers investigating unexplored and newly discovered territories, these researchers often launched themselves into the exotic world of cyberspace and traveled alongside these new religious netizens. They sought to describe the practices of life online and the blurring boundaries of online culture. These studies of religion online were similar to those found in early computer-mediated communications (CMC) research, as scholars attempted to describe in detail online social practices surfacing on the Internet. This ranges from Mnookin’s (1996) discussion of the rise of legal boundaries in the multi-user dimension of *LambdaMOO* to Dibble’s (1993) exploration of how anti-social behavior of online users in a text-based environment resulted in “virtual rape” of other community members, fueling an interesting discussion of what is “virtual” in a virtual community. First-wave Internet studies focused on questions related to the who, what, where, and when of life online. Of particular interest were questions of who is going online, what they are doing, and how this influences users at individual and group levels. In general, many first-wave researchers focused on key questions such as: What is happening online? How might these social aggregations be seen as communities? What effect does life online have on individual and group identities? Similarly, researchers interested in religion online attempted to pinpoint, conceptualize, and explain the rise of online community and issues related to the identity of those on the other side of the screen.

#### First-wave: defining online community

Online community has arguably been one of the most popular research topics within Internet studies. Beginning with Rheingold (1993), who presented the first study of how an online discussion forum might be conceptualized as a “virtual community,” researchers have taken a particular interest in observing how life online was being experienced in terms of community. Through the 1990s and onward, numerous case studies seeking to describe online communities emerged, from

studies of bulletin-board-based fan communities (Baym, 1995) to group interactions in textually or visually oriented multi-user fantasy environments (Reid, 1995). Such studies attempted to define community in a digital age.

Since the 1980s, religious groups have used computers to facilitate new forms of meeting and building “community” online. This is illustrated by Lohead’s (1997, p. 53) early study of the emergence of Christian discussion groups; he states online religious groups began to form “a sense of identity as a community that existed independently of whatever service they chose for their electronic communication.” A central concern for researchers in first-wave studies was trying to characterize and describe “virtual communities” as a new phenomenon representing the emerging Internet culture. Researchers focused attention on identifying the technologies and methods people use to congregate online and the type of discussions and practice that became the focal point of these groups. Studies of religious “virtual community” often highlighted certain traits that might serve as markers for defining online community.

These studies were highly descriptive and often used an ethnographic methodological approach in order to provide an in-depth picture of an online community. For example, in Fernback’s (2002) study of a neopagan online community, she highlighted how the Internet allows groups to constitute and define themselves as a community through creating distinct conversation patterns and putting into place communal religious ritual practices. In my early work, I offered a picture of how one online Charismatic-Pentecostal community could be described as the “congregation of the disembodied” (Campbell, 2003b). This suggested that the mere transporting of traditional religious community online might help widen Christians’ perception and understanding of global Christian community by allowing them to interact with “brothers and sisters in Christ from all over the world” (Campbell, 2003b, p. 197). Similarly, Herring’s work (2005), which combined online ethnography with contextual theology, outlined how a newsgroup could be defined as a religious community and formulate a distinctive theological method or praxis through its online activities.

Other first-wave studies sought to uncover how online conversations create the basis for online community formation. Howard’s (2000) ethnography of Christian fundamentalist websites showed how online conversations might emerge and create a common voice around a specific set of topics or shared religious conviction. In this way, a shared discourse from different online participants could create an online community, which may “facilitate multilateral communication between disparate individuals” (Howard, 2000, p. 242).

Still other first-wave studies approached the idea of online community as an overarching concept rather than identifying a single online community or a series of online communities. This allowed researchers to connect different expressions of religious practice online arising from a single religious tradition as being an “online community.” This is illustrated by Bunt’s work in *Virtually Islamic* (2000) which describes the online Islamic community in terms of various artifacts from online *fatwas* to online discussion forums such as “Ask the Iman,” yet links

them as simply diverse manifestations of the worldwide Muslim community. Bunt's understanding of a religious community online emerges through identifying specific forms of religious practice online that can be connected to the greater religious community of a specific religious tradition. Similarly, Lawrence (2002) offered insight into different expressions of Islam online, demonstrating how different online groups frequently seek to reinforce global religious structures by employing dominant metaphors found in Islam online. Taylor's (2003) study of Buddhist community online centered on the phenomena of cybersanghas where he argued that monasteries in Thailand are losing their place of centrality with populations shifting to urban centers. Yet in cyberspace, the cybersangha (*sangha* referring to a Buddhist monastic order) reconstitutes a new central connection-point for both monks and lay practitioners. He states, "Thai religion is changing to conform to new imagining (or mental religio-scapes) of this abstracted space" (p. 302). These first-wave studies offered detailed descriptions of both unique examples of religious community that were emerging in different online contexts and discussion of how online practice (or rituals) could be characterized as creating an online version of an offline faith community or tradition. Overall, first-wave studies focused on descriptive analysis of specific religious online communities, either by providing a detailed analysis of a single community or by considering how online religious community was emerging in relation to a specific religious tradition.

### **"Second-Wave" Studies of Religion Online**

There is no clear date or marker to indicate when studies of online research began to make the transition from predominantly descriptive and definitional to more focused exploration of common trends within online culture. However, by the late 1990s we began to see researchers involved in the first-wave of Internet research starting to shift in their work from the descriptive to more definitional explorations. This can be seen in Jones's shift in approach to the question "how do we study computer-mediated community?" The shift occurs between his *Cybersociety*, where he focuses on the challenges of defining online aggregations as communities (1995, p. 11), and *Cybersociety 2.0* in which he considers more critically what kind of community is an online community (1998, p. 4). Second-wave studies are marked by questions related to the how and why of life online; they further consider how themes such as community and identity function online, and why this challenges or relates to offline manifestations of the same. Another key question is: How might online community reshape definitions of religious community and culture? Thus, second-wave studies can be described as focusing on mapping typologies and comparative studies of forms of online community.

#### Second-wave: contextualizing community online

Second-wave studies of online community moved from focusing on detailing patterns of group interaction and definitions of community to providing more

concrete reflection on how members go about constructing and living these out in relation to their sense of online community. Researchers began to tease out the details of different roles and structures within online communities as a way to explain how these often influenced the extent to which members became involved in that community, as well as demonstrated varying levels of attachment to the community (Blanchard & Markus, 2004). Commonalities between studies emerged, as researchers began to note that members of online communities often identified similar characteristics or valued traits as part of their lived experiences of online groups (Kollock & Smith, 1994; Curtis, 1997). This work also led to investigating the direct connections between online and offline community patterns and behaviors. Research showed that online communities are unique in that they “are not tied to a particular place or time, but still serve common interest in social, cultural and mental reality ranging from general to special interest or activities” (van Dijk, 1998, p. 40).

In the second-wave studies of online religious community, attention shifted from primarily describing the form and function of online religious community to asking more refined questions related to members’ practices. Researchers began to explore not just members’ motivation for joining and investing in online communities, but also how online participation might begin to affect offline religion and community. This meant critically investigating how online community members were transforming traditional understandings of community through their online participation. A key question was: How might new forms of congregating online reshape community and religious culture? A forerunner of this line of questioning is Anderson’s study (1999) of the emergence of new communities of interpreters in Islam created through conversations supported by CMC. He identifies three new groups of interpreters of Islam online: “creole” pioneers, activist interpreters, and “officializing” interpreters. These new classes of interpreters online highlight an important factor of religious online community formation: the possibilities for technology to facilitate new religious identities outside traditional structures. Thus, online community may be a new source of authority and influence, potentially challenging traditional religious communities. Another example of second-wave research is Kim’s work on Chollian Buddhist online community in Korea. His study draws out specific characteristics and functions of online community seen through the ways members interacted together. By looking at the complexity of one individual Buddhist community and its members, he “makes a plea for the development of a new ideal-typical construct that takes into account the diverse functions of contemporary religious organizations – interpretive, interactive, integrative and instrumental” (Kim, 2005, p. 147). This shows how studying one religious community in detail can provide clues that point to a more refined understanding of community online, as well as shifts within contemporary religious communities and organizations at large.

Within second-wave studies, an important question has been the connection between online and offline religious community. For example, Young’s study (2004) applies Helland’s online-religion/religion-online distinction to Christian websites as a way to explain different expressions of “Internet Christianity” surfacing. He



shows that whether it is providing traditional religious information online or new mediated forms of Christian practice/ritual, Internet Christianity is not unconnected to offline Christianity. There is evidence that online religious communities consciously import traditional religious ritual into online contexts, even if these practices must be modified in some form in order for them to be online. These claims are supported by my in-depth study of the challenges online religious community pose to offline religious community (Campbell, 2004a). Here I identify some of the key fears expressed by religious practitioners and organizations: that the online religious community is in some way inauthentic, impoverished, and deceptive, and has the seductive potential power to lead people out of the pew and away from face-to-face community interaction. The study found online religious community is not a substitute for offline community participation; it merely serves as a supplement to extend these relationships and communication in unique and novel ways (Campbell, 2004b). Second-wave studies have focused on “the question of community” by highlighting how characteristics of membership practice and motivations for online community involvement point to larger shifts in understanding of the concept of community as a whole.

Second-wave studies turned their attention to inquiries of members’ practices and how their interactions and beliefs influenced conceptions and forms of online community. Here, how online communities relate to or challenge their offline counterparts has become an interesting and important question. These studies provide insight into the defining characteristics of online religious community as well as highlighting unique roles and forms of practice online that may lead to redefinition of people’s conception of community.

### **“Third-Wave” Research**

Over the past ten years, Internet research has moved from exploratory and definitional investigations to mapping dominant typologies and trends, which are being compared across contexts. We have also seen a turn towards an interpretative focus in research, as the growing body of knowledge about life online provides resources for making more substantive claims about dominant practices and influences of social interactions online. The current or “third wave” of research can be described as moving towards more theoretical, interpretive, and integrative work. Within CMC studies we see this move exemplified in the April 2007 issue of the *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* (<http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol12/issue3/>), where Internet researchers utilize theories of cultural variation, social capital, organizational identity, and interactivity in new media as tools to assess how the Internet both influences and reflects trends within the larger social sphere. In the study of community online, we see the progression to questions such as: How do the conditions of online community reflect or influence offline community? How do offline community patterns and discourse determine online use and beliefs? Thus, third-wave research moves towards opening up the investigation from just

mapping life online to considering how online–offline interaction and integration point towards findings about life in an information-dominated culture.

### Third-wave: current research on online religious community

Twenty-first century work on study of online community has emphasized that online social practices are closely linked to online social patterns; indeed researchers continue to emphasize that the Internet is “embedded” in everyday life (Wellman & Haythornwaite, 2002). Over and over, studies have found Internet users conceptually and practically connect their online and offline social practices as part of their social lives, rather than these being separate or disconnected spheres. Central to these investigations is considering how online groups point to the reshaping of traditional concepts of community, and point to larger social shifts within society about the very nature of community in contemporary society. As Katz and Rice’s (2002) *Synoptia Project* found, being an Internet user was positively associated with also being a member of a community, cultural, or religious organization, with users being slightly more likely than non-users to belong to more religious organizations (2002, p. 155). Findings such as these demonstrate that involvement in offline (including religious) organizations seems unaffected by Internet usage, neither encouraging nor distracting from participation in these groups (2002, p. 160). Katz and Rice also found that the Internet “does not supplant communication forms, but rather supplements them” as they found no reduction in overall levels of communication amongst Internet users (2002, p. 329). Their research, along with Kavanagh and Patterson’s (2002) work on the intersection of the Internet with voluntary organizations, seems to suggest that the net encourages and stimulates social interaction. This indicates that the Internet does not reduce overall social involvement, as many early pundits of online community feared. The connection between online and offline social involvement is echoed in recent studies of online religious community where it was found that community online served as a “supplement, not substitute” for offline church involvement (Campbell, 2003a, 2005a). Members joined and stayed involved in an online community in order to meet specific relational needs. Yet this participation could not fully meet religious members’ desire for face-to-face interaction and a shared embodied worship experience. Therefore, online religious activities represent simply one part of an individual’s overall religious involvement.

In general, studies of online religious community have evolved from broad to more refined questions. These studies began with attempts to define new forms of online interaction, such as looking at a specific online religious community as a way to explore new forms of social construction taking place online (Fernback, 2002), or by focusing on how online discourses may provide shape for new forms of religious community connection (Howard, 2000). This gave rise to general questions of why religious users go online, which helped document the many new forms of religious expression online as well as the variety of adaptations of traditional religious practices within religious communities online (Dawson & Cowan,

2004). This moved researchers toward mapping typologies of online community and other forms of spiritual experience or rituals online (Campbell, 2005b). Studies have begun to focus on questions about the extent to which offline religious communities and structures can influence online expressions of religious community (Livio & Tennebaum, 2004; Campbell, 2005a). Other studies are investigating the new forms of practice and social construction occurring within online religious communities (Krogh & Pillifant, 2004; Cowan, 2005). A key question within this third wave is how authority and power relations are constituted and challenged in online religious communities (Barker, 2005; Barzilai-Nahon & Barzilai, 2005; Campbell, 2007a; Campbell & Caulderon, 2007), and how online religious community can elucidate the ritual aspect of online community life (Krueger, 2005).

Research comparing online and offline participation has laid the ground for a current or emerging third wave of research within online religious community studies. Attention is moving towards developing theoretical frameworks for interpreting the conditions and functions of online religious communities. One way this is being done is through applying theories of the social construction of technology (SCOT) such as domestication (Silverstone, Hirsch, & Morley, 1992), which investigates religious communities as a distinctive user community of technology (Zimmerman-Umble, 1992). This is grounded in a social-shaping approach to technology, where engagement with technology is seen as a social process, informed by community values and beliefs that guide choices about technology. An example of this approach is the work of Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai's (2005) study of how female religious users in fundamentalist religious communities utilize the Internet and are influenced by communal discourse related to authority. Users describe and conceive of the Internet in terms of needs. The Internet is valued for meeting particular needs within the community, enabling women to work at home. This study led to a change in official views about the technology, yet this also required the technology to be reshaped to fit within the boundaries and beliefs of the community's culture. Similarly, my work on the Jewish Ultra Orthodox negotiation with the cell phone to create the "kosher cell phone" demonstrates how religious users employ shared narratives and beliefs to frame and reconstruct new media technologies (2006). These studies open up interesting theoretical questions of how religious groups may "culture a technology" (see Barzilai-Nahon & Barzilai, 2005), such as the Internet, so that it can be incorporated into the community and provide opportunities for group- or self-expression within these boundaries. It also shows how studies of online religious community are moving towards broader interpretive frameworks to help explain the conditions and practices of religious community online. Third-wave studies build upon previous work and seek to develop a more refined theoretical understanding of the motivations and social functions of online religious community.

The rise of third-wave studies does not negate or diminish the work that has gone on before; instead, it highlights the progressive building of knowledge about online culture. Each wave has provided the details essential for asking deeper and more focused questions about topics such as community and identity formation

online. As new technologies and phenomena arise, or are discovered, research will need to transition through each of these waves of research in order to define, map, and interpret these new areas. This process is essential in order to contextualize them with the growing interdisciplinary area of Internet studies. This framing also suggests that more waves of research and questioning are still ahead of us.

## **Future of Research on Religion Online**

From the previous review, we can see a profile forming of the past 12 years of research. Religion online research has focused on several key areas, most notably definitional and typology work on religious community, identity, ritual, and ethics online. Primarily qualitative methods have been employed, such as ethnographic studies involving online participant observation and/or interviews or content/discourse analysis. It is also evident that many researchers have focused predominantly on studying dominant religions from their geographical context – especially Christianity – and those seen as new or novel, such as Paganism and the new religious movements.

The Internet provides an important space to explore how community and other important elements such as identity and ritual are formed and negotiated within late modernity. While the study of religion typically falls within the bounds of religious studies and theology, we can see that studies of religion and the Internet bring together scholars from a wide variety of fields, which has contributed to the methodological and theoretical developments of current work. As has been shown above, the Internet is being used for a variety of religious purposes as Internet users continue to import traditional religious practices online and experiment with new representations of sacred and religious narratives. These religious uses of the Internet demonstrate that individuals continue to use media and technology to mediate meaning and negotiate the malleable character of identity and community in postmodern society (Hoover, 2006).

Yet, even after more than a decade of work, in some respects researchers have only begun to raise the necessary questions about when, how, and for whom the Internet can provide spaces where people can explore the meaning of religion and its function in their lives. Clearly there is need for more studies of community in religious contexts online, as well other themes, such as religious identity formation and presentation online (see Lövheim, 2004, 2006), in order to more fully develop our understanding of how the Internet is transforming religion. In light of this, I wish to suggest a potential agenda for the emerging and future waves of research on religion online. Some of these suggestions have been noted by Dawson and Cowan (2004, pp. 10–11) related to the future of the social-scientific study of religion online. Here, I spotlight six areas where studies of religion and the Internet would benefit from further input and exploration.

First, there is a need investigate why religious individuals are using the Internet and what specific groups they represent. Many current studies base their claims

on a single case study. There is need for more large-scale and long-term studies of religious Internet users to see how patterns of religious life emerge online. This is exemplified by the work of the Pew American and Internet Life Project and their studies such as *Faith Online* that have sought to track trends on religious Internet use in the US. Here, researchers within the interdisciplinary study of media, religion, and culture have played an important role in formulating research survey tools that help reach correlations between religiosity and media use (see Hoover et al., 2004). Yet in order to map trends within a global information society, more studies are needed of different cultural and religious groups such as recent work on global Catholic Internet users (Cantoni & Zyga, 2007) and a national survey on Swedish teens' Internet use for religious purposes (Lövheim, 2008).

A second area that has been neglected has been attention to the types of groups investigated in studies of religion online. While some religious groups (namely Christianity and Paganism) and geographic contexts (North America) have received significant study, others, namely Asian traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, have received little attention. Researchers focused on Asia have noted this lack and have begun to respond to it. This response is exemplified by a large-scale study of how religious leaders in Singapore have made use of the Internet – a study that demonstrates a need for other national studies of how religion influences Internet use and perception (Kluver & Cheong, 2007; Kluver et al., forthcoming). Scholars working on religion within diaspora communities have also noted that the Internet is playing an important role by helping displaced believers connect to holy sites and centers in their countries of origin (Helland, 2007; Helland, 2008). Also, much of the focus has been on studies of youth and mainstream groups. There is a need for studies that focus on other areas such as how issues of age, ethnicity, culture, and gender might influence religious Internet use.

Thirdly, studies of the nature and quality of people's experience when doing religious tasks online are needed. This will involve studies utilizing a combination of methodologies, including surveys and interviews of religious users. As stated above, early studies were often weak or limited in their methodological development of studying the phenomenon of religion online. Researchers could contribute to this area by providing methodological input on qualitative and quantitative research techniques through collaborative studies of religion online, as illustrated in more recent multiple method studies (Hashim et al., 2007). Also, future research should address and seek to further interpret previous claims from studies focused on a single case study.

Fourthly, there is a further need within future studies to review previous methods of study used in ethnographies and online content analysis to see which approaches have yielded the most detailed and reliable results. Identifying the most fruitful methods are important so that a common or even standardized format for study might be suggested.

Fifthly, as third-wave studies move towards interpreting the relationship between people's online and offline religious activities, more theoretical framing and

interpretation are needed. As new methodologies are often driven by new theoretical understandings, and vice versa, the connection between theory and method needs to be more carefully explored within studies of religion online. Researchers could especially offer input based on their experience studying media use and effects that might aid interpretation of the findings of these studies. The application and development of theoretical frameworks is especially important in order to consider the role media technologies play in audience/user responses, such as how religious authority is formed or negotiated online and its influence on offline faith communities. An example of this is my current work applying SCOT-based approaches to interpret how religious communities negotiate their use of new media (Campbell, 2007b). Also, more work needs to be done in applying existing theoretical frameworks to determine patterns of Internet usage, such as how the theory of planned behavior might determine norms of religious Internet usage (Ho, Lee, & Hameed, 2007). Studying how Internet user-practice correlates with offline behavior requires not just relying on user self-reports and observations: researchers further need to draw more explicitly on studies that consider how mass media mediates behavior, and historic studies of media use within religious communities.

Sixth and finally, there is a need for studies that uncover what features of technology are being utilized in the service of religious ends and what consequences result. As new forms of religious use of the Internet and other new media emerge, more studies will be needed to address the impact of these technologies on religious culture and belief (see Fukamizu, 2007). Recent developments, such as religious blogging, podcasting, and online worship in *Second Life*, are creating new forms of religious outreach and reception. These developments are trends in need of detailed exploration.

This chapter has argued that the study of religion online has been an interdisciplinary venture. As studies of religion and the Internet move forward, it will be important to continue to draw in new discussion partners who bring with them expertise and interpretive tools that are currently missing in attempts to understand this growing area of technology use. Scholars from area studies, organizational communication, and media studies should be especially encouraged to join this conversation. Work on the global impact of religion online will benefit from input from political science or rhetoric; studies of gender and religion online should engage with scholars of gender and women's studies in such a discussion. While over a decade of research on religion and the Internet has accumulated, providing interesting insights into religious transformation and adaptation to the online context, much work still lies ahead in order to answer the question of where the Internet is taking religion. As the Internet is still an emerging technology, we have many years of research ahead of us to fully understand its complexities and its impact on religion. This provides a challenge and fertile opportunity for a variety of scholars who seek to become involved with the study of how religion is being altered in an age of information.

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