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Cyberspace and the Sacralization of Information

Sean O'Callaghan

Abstract

The attempts by advocates of the Swedish piracy movement to create a religious grouping known as Kopimism, a new religion which takes as its main ideas the beliefs that all information is sacred and all information should be freely available, have opened up an important debate around the nature of information itself and the ways in which it can be conceived of as being sacralized: Information is holy, Code is law, Copying is sacrament, is the motto of the Kopimist movement, with cyberspace itself being viewed as a sacred space. There has been considerable debate around the validity of Kopimism as a religious entity and this paper explores the historical development of the movement, as well as the philosophical rationale behind what it claims to be its core beliefs.

Keywords

Kopimism, cyberspace, cyberspirituality, Gnosticism, information

1 Cyberspace and religion

Although the Internet itself is the product of a scientific and technological milieu, scholars of religion have drawn attention to the considerable profile which they believe religion and spirituality have in cyberspace. In this opening section, I will present the insights of some scholars who argue that cyberspace is a friendly environment for the exchange of religious ideas. Much research still needs to be done in this field, but several scholars make the case for cyberspace as a space in which mainstream religions can implant themselves and in which new forms of religious expression can emerge. The religious language used by Hogan and Wellman presents the Internet almost as an incarnation of the divine: “The Internet has descended from an awesome part of the ethereal firmament to become immanent in everyday life” (2012, p.43). The digital religion which emerges

from within cyberspace is, however, Gregory Price Grieve argues, very different from religion in the non-virtual world, or in what Grieve calls “analog religion” (2013, p.108). Grieve states that digital religion in cyberspace deals well with the challenges thrown up by Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of ‘liquid modernity’ (2013, p.109). According to Grieve, one of the results, however, of this view of digital religion as a response to the ever fluctuating challenges of the era is that religion in cyberspace is constantly in flux and cannot be understood as a permanent solution to any difficulties of life. This makes it ‘brittle’ (ibid) Grieve writes, but I would argue that ‘flexible’ would be a better description. The very context of cyberspirituality changes the nature of religion, according to Grieve, because “digital religion cannot be characterized as simply traditional religion packaged in a new media form” (2013, p.110). As a result, “digital religion is unique because it addresses the anxieties produced in a liquid modern world by using new media’s technological aspects to weave together religious metanarratives and the ideology surrounding the digital” (ibid). In examining the kinds of religious metanarratives which have taken root in the digital era, Christopher Partridge argues that “the concept of the cultic milieu is an extremely helpful one for understanding contemporary alternative spirituality in the West” (Partridge 2005, vol. 1, p.66). He draws on the work of Colin Campbell and Roy Wallis to explain the rise of cultic/mystical religion in opposition to more traditional forms of faith in the West and uses the term ‘occulture’ as an alternative for ‘mystical’ in defining the spiritual atmosphere of the occultically-influenced West: “Occulture is the new spiritual environment in the West; the reservoir feeding new spiritual springs; the soil in which new spiritualities are growing” (2005, vol. 1, p.4). Where Grieve evaluates cyberspiritualities as being ‘brittle,’ Partridge adopts a more optimistic perspective and believes that their strength actually lies in their ability to adapt quickly to a number of different contexts, enabling them to respond to the mystical and fluid nature of occultural spiritualities: “Cyber-occulture can be responded to with ease and with few constraints. The vast occultural reservoir is, for the most part, available and accessible” (2005, vol.2, pp. 140-41). For Partridge, cyberspace is “an occulture-friendly environment. Indeed, it would be difficult to think of a better environment for the growth of occulture” (2005, vol.2, p.135). As would be expected, there is considerable debate as to whether or not cyberspace can be understood as a natural, or even supernatural, space for religion. The view that cyberspace is a sacred space is generally enunciated by scholars of religion, who might be expected to discern religious and spiritual themes in non-standard religious contexts, especially if, like Partridge, they are arguing for an overall thesis of sacralization or re-enchantment in such environments.

2 Hyper-Real Religions

More empirical research would need to be done to prove Partridge's assertion about cyberspace being an 'occulture-friendly' environment, but we can look at how certain forms of religion are functioning within that sphere currently. As more and more religious surfers and seekers look for answers online, one would expect to see the growth of not only traditional faith systems within cyberspace, which we do see, but also, as in the 'real' world, a certain amount of evolution, adaptation and innovation. More interesting still has been the growth of new forms of religion online, forms which would probably never have been able to emerge to the extent to which they have if they had not been planted in a global, interactive, largely unregulated, non-authoritarian and fluid environment like cyberspace. Hyper-real religions, such as Jediism, Matrixism and groupings such as the Otherkin, certain groups of Vampires and those who base their spirituality on elements of popular culture, such as Lord of the Rings, all have a growing and lively presence largely online and sometimes in the 'real-world.'

"Hyper-real religion refers to a simulacrum of a religion, created out of, or in symbiosis with, popular culture...Although hyper-real religions have existed since at least the 1960s, the Internet has been instrumental in the growth of this phenomenon" (Possamai 2012, p.2).

A very different and unique form of religious grouping has emerged, however, in recent years, which is different in character from occultural groups and hyper-real spiritualities. Kopimism, a new religion from Sweden, is concerned with a spiritualized view of information itself, in a style which is reminiscent of Gnosticism.

3 The Changing Character of 'Information'

The old adage that 'information is power' or a category of knowledge has, in the age of computer technology, been overshadowed by the realization that information has become something which, paradoxically, is both a valuable commodity to be exchanged, and also something which is essentially metaphysical. Richard J Cox, referring to the thought of Neil Postman argues that information in the computer-technological age is different from information in the seventeen and eighteen hundreds, an era which might legitimately have a claim on the title 'The Age of Information' (2001, p.54). In the past, information, Cox argues, did not have a "separate existence" (ibid): it was generally "embedded in a context" (ibid). Information in the computer age is, however, a discrete entity- a "commodity to be bought and sold" (ibid). Erik Davis, author of

Techgnosis, explains information as “a practical chunk of reified experience” (1998, p.81) which is nevertheless “one of the fundamental building blocks of the cosmos. If electricity is the soul of the modern age, information is its spirit” (ibid). Davis makes the point that technology, and especially communication technology has actually merged with humanity to create a kind of hybrid of human beings and “a global web of messages and signals” (1998, p.82). The nod towards transhumanism here is unmistakable, but information is imbued with a spiritual character which is rarely found in the purely mechanistic world of the transhumanist vision. He writes of the way in which the concept of information has been transformed so that it now has “an incorporeal mystique” (ibid) and “has become an almost luminescent icon, at once fetish and logos” (ibid). While acknowledging that Gnosticism is only one of the possible routes to understanding the underlying structures of information itself, Davis, writing in particular about the status of information in a post World War II environment, maintains that the Gnostic principle “underscores the metaphysical patterns and Promethean fire that the new category of reality unleashed into the postwar mind” (ibid). Information, it seems, has moved a considerable distance from its role as embedded data to assuming a trans-textual character which is metaphysical in nature and spiritualized. Indeed, Cox uses the language of the sacred realm to describe the contemporary significance of information, a significance based both on information’s assumption of a separate existence and the commodified value assigned to it by Postman. Cox writes about ‘The Computer Store as the New Church for our Information Age’ (2001, p. 52) where those who shop are described as “the cyberelite- the new priesthood” (ibid). The conversation between sales-people and customers within the technological sanctuary is “a low chant-like hum, the new mantra of the Information Age” (ibid). In an echo of Davis’ description of information’s “incorporeal mystique” (1998, p. 82), Cox maintains that one of the roles we assign to computers is that of enabling us to “escape our physical being” (2001, p. 52). The definition of information, he argues, is not the same across all ages and societies, but “we must seek its unique meaning in each age, where technology and culture combine to isolate different kinds of information” (ibid). Quoting Mark Dery, Cox recognizes that “In a world increasingly dependent on digital technologies, the esoteric knowledge and arcane terminology associated with computer science confers on it an almost religious status” (ibid). Cox even goes so far as to describe Cyberspace in Augustinian terms as “the new heaven on earth, a heavenly city” (ibid). Referring to authors who have commented on the religious nature of information technology, he continues, using the words of Erik Davis:

As one of these authors relates, the common problem with the fixation on cyberculture is “a mistaking [of] technological possibilities for social or spiritual ones.” He sees that “Gnostic lore [the concept of self-knowledge] also provides a mythic key for the kind of informania and conspiratorial thinking that comes to haunt the postwar world, with its terror of nefarious cabals, narcotic technologies, and invisible messages of deception (2001, p. 58).

Cox continues to frame his view of information technology in sacred language, speaking of the worship and idolatry of technology, the way in which some even try to find their destiny through it and seek to use it to overcome their own mortality (ibid). While Cox warns against the dangers posed to spirituality as a whole by an over-reliance on information technology, at the same time he strongly underscores the alternative spiritual vision offered by the technology itself, a spirituality which he regards as being fundamentally unsatisfying, but which mirrors, nevertheless, a sacralized view of the role of information in the contemporary era. He urges scepticism about the ability of information technology to sufficiently meet any spiritual needs of humanity, but he also recognizes that information mediated in the technological age does have a spiritual character which enables it to be presented as a viable, even if, in his view, an ultimately unfulfilling, alternative to traditional faith systems. The idea that information in and of itself can have a sacred character is at odds with the notion of information as a unit embedded in a certain context. The concept of ‘embeddedness’ requires that spiritual information be encoded within spiritual texts and that there be a clear distinction between the spiritual and the secular. However, as Jeff Kripal explains, “the category of occulture implies that there is a sacred dimension to secularization, that Western culture is not becoming less religious, but differently religious. Occulture, then, represents a dialectic, “a confluence of secularization and sacralisation, not a final victory of one process over the other” (2011, p. 29). Kripal draws extensively for his understanding of occulture on the work of Partridge, who, in his own writing on the topic has significantly widened the meaning of both the terms ‘occulture’ and ‘occult’. Partridge offers a number of interpretations for both categories, but one which I want to highlight for the purposes of this chapter describes occultism as “a subculture of various secret societies and ‘enlightened’ teachers involved in disciplines concerned with the acquisition of arcane and salvific knowledge (gnosis and theosophia)...”(2005, vol.1, p.69). The link between information, meaning and knowledge is not always as secure as might be assumed, but Davis makes the valid point that

“the information paradigm does provide a number of powerful ways to think about what we mean by meaning. To start with, information seems to have something to do with novelty. For you to provide me with genuine information, you must tell me something new” (1998, p. 84).

Information, then, when meaningful, can produce knowledge, even the ‘salvific knowledge,’ which can be gnosis and theosophia (Partridge 2005, vol.1, p. 69). Davis references Norbert Wiener’s discussion of the difference between information and entropy where “the order and form-generating power of information systems is basically analogous to what some people call God” (1998, p. 87). According to Davis, even the information-laden DNA structure may be understood by Kabbalists as reflecting the creative power of the cosmic Torah which was instrumental in the genesis of all creation (ibid). Indeed, in genetic terms, DNA may be thought of as constituting the human soul in a

reductionist view of human beings which views them simply as “information-processing machines” (1998, p. 88). It is Davis’ discussion about the relationship between Gnosticism and information in the contemporary age, however, which is most relevant for this article, because Davis claims that “the mythic structures and psychology of Gnosticism seem strangely resonant with the digital zeitgeist and its paradigm of information” (1998, p. 80). This Gnostic vision explains for Davis “the more extreme dreams of today’s mechanistic mutants and cyberspace cowboys, especially their libertarian drive towards freedom and self-divinization, and their dualistic rejection of matter for the incorporeal possibilities of mind” (ibid). Gnosticism, claims Davis, helps him “to understand the often unconscious metaphysics of information culture by looking at it through the archetypal lens of religious and mystic myth” (ibid). It would seem that this is a good way of describing Kopimist information culture, which appears to adopt systems of both unconscious and semi-conscious metaphysics through such archetypal lens. I assert ‘unconscious and semi-conscious’ because Kopimism is still a movement in development, which has not worked out its metaphysics in any kind of sophisticated form, but which still wants to adopt the language of religion in the interim, while not subscribing to any form of deity.

4 Information is holy. Code is Law. Copying is Sacrament: Kopimism ¹

Very little has been written in an academic sense about Kopimism, a new religious grouping which gained official recognition in Sweden in 2012 (Kopimistfundet.se 2013) and which now has a presence in several countries worldwide. The basic premise of Kopimism is that information is sacred and cyberspace itself is a holy place. A great deal of controversy swirls around Kopimism which many view as a movement which could be described as ‘sacralized piracy’, as it emphasizes the free flow of information online, the need for freedom from laws of copyright and the normalization of what would generally be thought of as online piracy. Most of what is known about Kopimism emerges from its own websites which represent the movement’s existence in a number of different nations, and from various news articles which have generally been sympathetic and curious about a religious entity which, on the face of it, seems to have little in common with what is generally thought to fit into the categories of either religion or spirituality. Kopimism views actual information itself as a sacred canon because of its very nature as information and not necessarily because it reflects themes and topics normally considered to be sacred. According to Kopimism, all information is sacred in and of itself and because it is sacred it cannot be the exclusive possession of any one person, organization or religious authority (ibid).

¹ http://kopimistsamfundet.ca/index_main.html (Accessed October 2014).

In recognizing actual information itself as holy and the replication of information as a sacred act, Kopimism argues that cyberspace does not just ‘contain’ the sacred but is itself sacred, because its actual structure and make-up is composed of sacred material present in code, which is itself information and ‘law’.² In Genesis, God speaks the world into existence and, according to Logos Theology, ‘encodes’ himself in the habitus and history of the world forever more. Logos Theology is posited within Christian theology as a way of understanding “...the divine purpose in history” (Elliott-Binns 1956, p. 89). In cyberspace, code as ‘Logos Spermatikos’ is that which gives birth to the virtual world and allows it to continue, replicate, adapt and transform. It is code which sets the resulting sequence in motion and which, like the God of Logos Theology, remains immanent in its creation.

The Church of Kopimism emerged out of a context of piracy, specifically from the file-sharing website known as ‘The Pirate Bay.’ It would be tempting, as many do, to view its foundation simply as a way of legitimizing internet piracy by creating a religious front system to disguise its true intentions or to provide some kind of legal protection under the cloak of religious freedom for its adherents’ activities. While recognizing the potential reasons for scepticism, I want to argue that Kopimism actually goes much further in its theological explorations than it needs to if its intention is simply to provide a ‘fig-leaf’ of legality. Its self-reflections on the nature of information and the role of the sacred in cyberspace, even if that sacredness is not linked specifically to any deity or entity, demonstrate an attempt at developing an understanding of sacred information and knowledge which is entirely in keeping with the views of those groups and movements which interpret cyberspace as an occultural space where information which was once forbidden, hidden or regarded as part of the ‘underground’ can be stored and accessed by all. One of the most interesting aspects of the message of Kopimism is its widespread use of religious language and religious imagery which distinguishes it from what it could so easily have become, a kind of techno-humanist entity. Sweden already has a thriving humanist association which provides secular alternatives to religious ceremonies and Kopimism could have framed itself within the context of secular ritualism, or even while registering as a religion, it could have chosen to then express itself in the language of humanism, but it has instead chosen to express itself in religious terms, with the word ‘sacred’ and its associated meanings as the most prominent example of religious vocabulary in its working lexicon.

Recent writing on Kopimism consists of interviews with its founder and media-based reactions to its creation. The interviews with Isak Gerson, a student of Philosophy at the University

2 The homepage of the Canadian Kopimist site explains this most clearly in its assertion that “Information is holy. Code is Law. Copying is Sacrament.” The juxtaposition of the terms ‘holy’ and ‘law’ is suggestive of the relationship between religious law and resultant doctrine. <http://kopimistsamfundet.ca/> (Accessed October 2014).

of Uppsala, present a mixed picture of his intentions in establishing the movement as a religious grouping, indicating that the core issues of identity are still being thought through. Alongside Gerson's somewhat vague expressions of belief, however, lie the online explorations of others in the movement about Kopimism and, for a movement which is still so new, an increasingly sophisticated development of the philosophy which underpins the system and its relationship to wider spiritual and existential concerns.

The term 'Kopimism' comes from the Swedish version of the English words 'copy me.' The genesis of Kopimism lies in the formation of the movement known as Piratbyrå (the Piracy Bureau) in 2003, founded in response to Antipiratbyrå (the Anti-Piracy Bureau) which was established in Sweden in 2001, the agenda of which was to protect copyright against piracy. Piratbyrå formed The Pirate Bay website, which is a site where copyrighted information can be downloaded. The use of the term 'Kopimi' (copy me) initially made reference to the Kopimi 'K' symbol which, when placed on any intellectual property meant that the information could be freely copied (Romig 2012). A political party related to the same agenda as Piratbyrå was founded in 2006, taking the name 'The Pirate Party' or Piratpartiet. Piratbyrå itself was closed in 2010, but Piratpartiet, sharing a similar agenda, but a separate, though related, historical development, remains prominent in Swedish politics. The party won 7.1% of the national vote in Sweden in the 2009 elections to the European Parliament, securing two seats. Its membership is growing and its influence is strong.³ One of the founding principles of the Piratpartiet is that "Knowledge belongs to everyone" (Piratpartiet.se 2013) and it is clear in reading the language associated with the foundational principles of Kopimism itself, that there is considerable crossover between the principles of the Piratpartiet and The Church of Kopimism. In fact, it could be said that Kopimism 'sacralizes' those principles. Isak Gerson, himself a member of the Piratpartiet is recognized as the founder of The Church of Kopimism, or to give the church its more proper name, The Missionary Church of Kopimism. Rollo Romig, writing in *The New Yorker*, describes the relationship between Gerson's Kopimism and the Piracy movement thus: "The Missionary Church of Kopimism picks up where Piratbyrå left off: it has taken the values of the Swedish Pirate movement and codified them into a religion" (2012)

3 The Piratpartiet's 'Declaration of Principles' can be read in English at <http://english.piratpartiet.se/principles/> (Accessed October 2014).

5 The Religious Elements of Kopimism

It is to the religious elements of Kopimism that I will now turn, drawing largely from Kopimist sites and emic definitions and terminology. The English version of the Swedish site states

A religion is a belief with rituals. The missionary kopimistamfundet is a religious group centered in Sweden who believe that copying and the sharing of information is the best and most beautiful that is. To have your information copied is a token of appreciation, that someone thinks you have done something good. All knowledge to all. The search for knowledge is sacred. The circulation of knowledge is sacred. The act of copying is sacred. All people should have access to all information produced (Kopimistfundet.se 2013).

The site continues to explain that Kopimism has its own priesthood, the Ops, who are charged with pastoral care and the hearing of confession, these confessions being covered by secrecy. In fact, secrecy itself is considered to be holy within the church. This is because communication is regarded as being sacred so any attempt to monitor communications is “a direct sin” (ibid). The Canadian site contains a wealth of information and has on its home page this statement: “Never before in history [has] a spiritual belief spread naturally in peace and so rapidly to all corners of our world as Kopimism is doing...Internet is holy. This is the Information Age” (Kopimistfundet.ca 2013). It is clear from this site and from the Swedish site that one of the goals of registering Kopimism as a religion is so that, in words ascribed to Isak Gerson, “we can live out our faith without fear of persecution” (ibid). The use of the word ‘faith’ here is especially interesting and it is juxtaposed with ‘fear of persecution’, a phrase all too familiar in religious contexts. The proposed Kopimist Constitution speaks of “our strong defence of the intrinsic value of information. We ascribe this value to all information irrespective of its content” (ibid). Information is referred to as “the holiest of holies” (ibid). “Worship through meditation is considered to be sufficient to be a member of the Kopimist community” (ibid). The life of the Kopimist is to be one of “sanctification” to the “religious foundations” (ibid). Counselling taken from the priests, the Ops, or Operators, is described as pastoral care which results from a connection “which consecrates the holy bond between Op and believer” (ibid). There are far more spiritual terms in use throughout Kopimist websites, more than can be looked at in this article, and it is clear that a great deal of thought has gone into creating a religious lexicon and that the lexicon has been formulated by people who have religious backgrounds. The language closely mirrors ecclesiastical vocabulary. The references to ritual and meditation are there ostensibly to fulfil the requirements of Swedish law, as Gerson intimates, (George 2012) but the emphatic references to the sacredness of information itself are striking. The Constitution is a very detailed document and the term, ‘Missionary’ in the name of the church is very deliberate and the spread of the message of Kopimism is taken very seriously and

referred to extensively. The first Kopimist wedding, which took place in Belgrade, contains some interesting language, where during the vows, the traditional words “as long as you both shall live” are replaced with “as long as the information exists”, which indicates a view of the human being as a vehicle of information.⁴

Gerson’s own statements on the religious nature of Kopimism have at times been vague, but at other times have been illuminating. In an interview with the New York Times in 2012, Gerson, while rejecting the idea of a deity, refers to ‘holy values’ as the basis for his thinking. The importance of these values is emphasized by him when he states “You have to have it in your backbone” (Tagliabue 2012). His statements are reminiscent of the concept of religion as ‘ultimate concern’ “For me it’s a kind of believing in deeper values than worldly values,” he says (ibid). Referring to the values of information sharing, Gerson says

“I think we see it as a theological remix. Christianity took from Judaism and turned it into something new, and the Muslims did the same. We are part of a tradition...Our angle is not to mock religion. We recall that Christianity and the Gospels, with their collections of little stories, are examples of copying” (ibid).

Perhaps the most cogent evaluation so far comes from Chris Baraniuk, who writes about the cybernetic vision of Kopimism, where “the hive mind assimilates and remixes the very idea of an isolated being or a soul” (2012).

Religion is a ‘cloak’, Baraniuk says and “is merely a helpful collection of signs which allows Kopimism to exist during our age when in fact, so its followers believe, their practices are really endemic to a future time and a civilization quite alien to our own” (ibid). Interestingly, Baraniuk recognizes in Kopimism a move towards ‘spiritual transcendence’ even if this transcendence is achieved “through repetition action and reproduction”, referring to the act of copying, which Baraniuk views as indicating “an extreme reductionism and divestment of humanity itself” (ibid).

6 Conclusion

Kopimism certainly defies the notion of the ‘embeddedness’ or immanence of information as it elevates information to something which is far more transcendent, akin to the Kabbalistic ‘cosmic Torah.’ Yet, as Baraniuk pointed out, Kopimism is ultimately reductionist and in its commitment to valuing all information equally, it has become mechanistic and wedded to the indiscriminate

4 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRMPCFexWlk> (Accessed October 2014).

sacralization of information, while at the same time claiming to elevate the same information to the status of ‘holy of holies.’ In doing so, it cheapens what it claims to hold as precious and becomes reductionist. Yet, it can probably best be understood as a form of Gnosticism, with its high valuing of freedom, its divinization of information and its antinomianism. However, in calling for the availability of all information for all, it avoids the exclusive nature often associated with Gnosticism. Ultimately, Kopimism seems out of place in the taxonomy of cyberspirituality. It can fit into the occultural category because of its very strong sacralizational character, but it is, I would argue, a new form of cyberspirituality, in a category of its own at this present time and perhaps more prescient of a future sacralization of technology which wears the vestments of the religious priesthood, utilizes the language of faith but lives out the transhumanist vision. Baraniuk may be insightful indeed when he describes the religious elements of Kopimism as a ‘cloak’ for individuals whose “practices are really endemic to a future time and a civilization quite alien to our own” (ibid).

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Biography

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