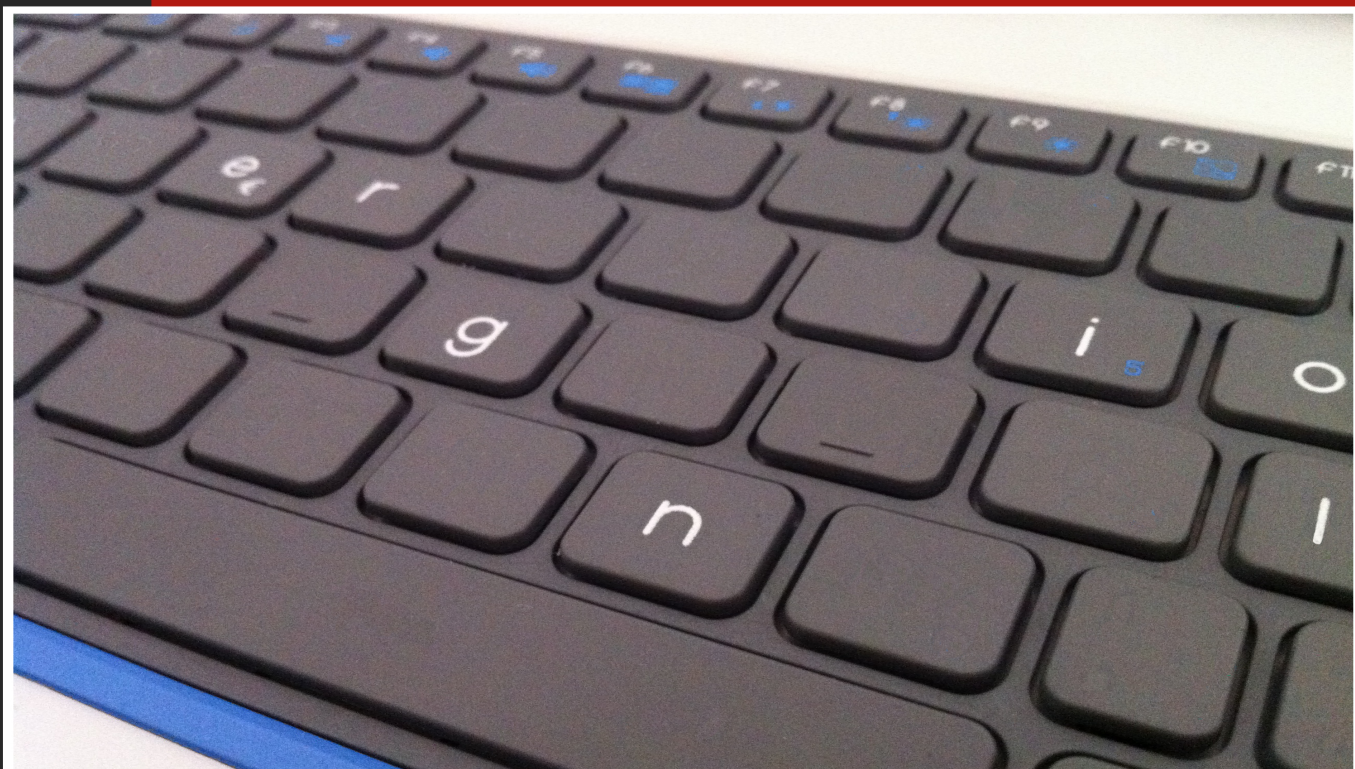




# online

HEIDELBERG JOURNAL OF RELIGIONS ON THE INTERNET



## Volume 06 (2014)

Institute for  
Religious Studies

University  
of Heidelberg

# Table of Contents

- 01 **Cyberspace and Eschatological Expectations - On How Techno-Sciences Bolster the Belief in a Spiritually Connected Humanity**  
*Cecilia Calheiros*
- 24 **'Okhti' Online - Spanish Muslim Women Engaging Online Jihad – a Facebook Case Study**  
*Claudia Carvalho*
- 42 **Virtual Christian Places - Between Innovation and Tradition**  
*Stefan Gelfgren*
- 66 **Digital Participatory Culture: Transnationality, Fandom & Diversity - Religion and Gender in German-written Fan Fiction and Fan Forums**  
*Lisa Kienzl*
- 90 **Cyberspace and the Sacralization of Information**  
*Sean O'Callaghan*
- 103 **Trans-European Adaptations in the Diamond Way - Negotiating Public Opinions on Homosexuality in Russia and in the U.K.**  
*B. Scherer*
- 126 **Double-clicking the Temple Bell - Devotional Aspects of Jainism Online**  
*Tine Vekemans*
- 144 **Remixing Images of Islam - The Creation of New Muslim Women Subjectivities on YouTube**  
*Kayla Renée Wheeler*
- 164 **I 'like' my Patriarch. Religion on Facebook - New Forms of Religiosity in Contemporary Georgia**  
*Sophie Zviadadze*



# **Cyberspace and Eschatological Expectations**

## **On How Techno-Sciences Bolster the Belief in a Spiritually Connected Humanity**

Cecilia Calheiros

### **Abstract**

Following the studies analyzing the phenomena of religiosity that new technologies create (O. Krüger, D. Noble, H. Campbell), this paper questions the ways in which the Internet is understood as a salvation means. This media, closely linked to the idea of spiritual unity of humanity as a higher stage of evolution, inspired technological innovations underpinned by eschatological concerns. These expectations are related to the way the mind works and how increasing it through techno-sciences. The former are motivated by a quest for immortality by getting rid of the body, transferring the human spirit into the machine. Thus, predictive softwares, such as the Global Consciousness Project, the WebBot Project or Google Brain, have been designed mixing global consciousness, the anticipation of the future and apocalypse. What is the meaning of the phenomenon of spiritual reappropriation of the Internet? How do we move from a technological link to a spiritual connection that would supposedly transcend humanity? Most importantly, what links could be found between predictive softwares and the willingness to disembodiment man to make him immortal? Based on an analysis of the canonical sources of cyberculture and a study of communities following anticipations of predictive softwares, this paper analyzes the uses of belief in global consciousness when linked to Internet-assisted divination. First, it shows that the development of these softwares reveals a certain secularization of the discourses around global consciousness, while scientific positivism emerges from then. Then, it enlightens us about the role of techno-sciences in the building of lived utopias.

### **Keywords**

internet, eschatological expectations, practiced utopias, techno-sciences, artificial intelligence.

## 1 Introduction

In December 2012, Google hired the Pope of transhumanism Ray Kurzweil in order to develop an artificial intelligence program called “Google Brain”. This would usher the Internet Juggernaut into a world of permanent connection where users are to be provided information even before the said information is requested. Thus, thanks to algorithms burrowing into the Web’s Big Data, some predictive software would extremely precisely anticipate the tastes of web-users. But the scope of this research program goes way beyond this. It is about finding the brain’s functioning algorithm in order to devise a consciousness from an artificial being and to conceive machines of which the intelligence would be greater than that of humans. By June 2013, Google announced it had created an “artificial brain”. More precisely, this is a self-learning, supervision-free software boosted by the power of some 16 000 processors. Some tests have revealed that this brain is able to learn alone how to recognize a cat, in other words to conceptualize, without the help of any referential, what would amount to, in the human realm, a child learning to read alone. The framework within which *Google Brain* evolves is that of a “technological singularity”. This phrase is referring to the time, often depicted by transhumans, when humans will be overtaken by artificial forms of intelligence. What bolsters this project is a quest for immortality which, in time, aims to get rid of human flesh by transferring the human spirit onto a machine. Therefore, although one may construe this project as stemming from the willingness to do away with human being as we know him by connecting him to a machine, it remains that this trend in itself is nothing new; for that matter, nor is new the use of algorithms for software anticipating the future.

What links may be found between predictive softwares and the willingness to disembodify man in order to bestow upon him a degree of immortality? Science historian David Noble has shown that enchantment about and fascination with science have often been tinged with religiosity. Since the Middle-Ages, technology has been identified by Christianity as the possibility to find perfection anew, not only as a sign of Grace but also as a way to get ready for imminent salvation (Noble 1999, p1). Each technological breakthrough linked to communication -think for instance of printing or of the radio- has bred a range of religious and spiritual interpretations (Noble 1999). In this respect, the advent of computers and of the Internet in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was no exception. Now, in the era of IT, the old dreams of transcending the incarnated and spiritual nature of Man, along with the creation of artificial beings, have taken a peculiar turn. Indeed, it is within the North-American counterculture, ever hungry for esotericism and technology, that spiritual interpretations around the power of techno-sciences actually flourished. These have generated innovations influenced by eschatological concerns, linked to the working of the spirit and to the ways to augment its power *via* techno-sciences. Thus, Princeton devised its *Global Consciousness Project* as early as the 1990s. This is a research program at the very margins of science, whose aim

was to demonstrate the existence of what Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin called “Noosphere” (1956). With the help of quantum physics and of random numbers generators (RNGs) placed throughout the world, the project aimed at proving the existence of a space where human thoughts may be gathered together. More recently, the *WebBot Project*, itself a software anticipating the future and based on Internet algorithmics, has for instance predicted the end of the world. The difference with *Google Brain* is that what once belonged to the realm of cybernetics pioneers, to marginal sciences and even pseudo-sciences, has now passed on to a corporation listed on the stock exchange, which has invested several billion dollars in order to hire competent and renowned scientists as well as “Google evangelists” who are heirs to the counterculture. This, then, is not about soft (or not-so-soft) speculations upon the future of Man but, really, about research programs with actual applications in the middle run.

This somewhat lengthy description of recent research projects highlights a degree of cohesiveness between the history of computer culture and its attendant philosophical concerns, connected as these are with more or less secularized eschatological expectations. The way the Internet is being used today and the representations and aspirations thereof are, as we will see, rooted in the Californian counterculture. This would apprehend the development of computers as a form of technical and social connectedness apt to generate a spiritual connectedness then able to transcend humanity. This article analyses this interpretation, which confers upon the Internet the capability to transcend individual thoughts by creating a world community (Krueger 2007). Called ‘global consciousness’, this belief rests upon in the notion that this medium would link individuals technically but also spiritually. Such interconnection would spawn a collective spirit, some superior entity which would signal the advent of the “Spirit Realm”. On the one hand, global consciousness would become alive on the Internet and would be apprehended thanks to software analyzing the data therein circulating. On the other hand, these types of softwares would have the capacity to anticipate events, notably the end of the world.

In a globalised, uncertain world (Beck 2001) where technology is ubiquitous, what may be the meaning of such a spiritual re-appropriation of the socio-technical environment that the Internet ultimately is? How did the notion of a humanity in continuum actually emerge within cyberspace? How has it been possible to shift from a technological link to a spiritual link which might transcend humanity? I wish here to analyze the birth, spread, function and uses of the belief in global consciousness through the lens of the articulation and the complementary nature of sciences and techniques and beliefs and spiritual imageries around the Internet. In order to do that, we first need to refer back to the creative impulse at the origin of cybernetics and to the way this techno-science impacted upon the theoretical framework of global consciousness. Thereafter, we will understand the way the psychedelic and technophile fringe of the 1960-1970s North-American counterculture, by re-appropriating itself I.T and the Internet, kindled afresh the notion of interconnectedness

between beings in this highly technical context. Elaborated mostly from secondary sources, this historical digression is necessary for the reader to comprehend how the spread of the Internet in the 1980s-1990s spawned the belief in a spiritually-connected humanity as a step further in the evolution of Man. Lastly, the eschatological dimension of this belief, intrinsically linked to the evolutions of I.T., has been growing since 2000. We will analyze one of its most profound shifts, i.e. the use of global consciousness as a tool allowing to foresee future events, such as the end of the world. I wish here to expose the results of an ongoing research, based on a re-questioning of canonical sources of cyber-culture and on my fieldwork on North-American and French virtual communities who adhere to the statements made by predictive types of softwares.

## **2 On the conceptual origins of global consciousness : from cybernetics to the centrality of communication**

Cybernetics is a techno-science born back in the 1940s. More broadly known for its impact upon the development of computing systems, the influence of cybernetics nevertheless reaches beyond the profusion of socio-technical environments that we are witnessing today. Ever since its creation, cybernetics has been harnessed by a normative and moral dimension around communicative virtues. It is this aspect, a central one as we will shortly see, that has profoundly influenced our time and which is at the core of this study.

The founding father in the field is the renowned Massachusetts Institute of Technology mathematician Norbert Wiener. After he refused to join the Manhattan Project and because he was traumatized by World War II atrocities, he developed a whole reflection upon the uses of scientific discoveries and technical inventions based upon the promotion of greater social responsibility. The very word “cybernetics”, from Greek *κυβερνήτης* (*kubernêtês*), refers to the art of piloting and, metaphorically, to that of governing. By introducing this terminology in 1948, Wiener laid stress upon the necessity to build a better world in which the intensive use of media and communication networks would make it possible to forestall the tragic consequences of totalitarian ideologies. Wiener saw in communication and its regulation among living beings, machines and social processes the capability to restructure society in such a way as to curtail its self-destructing effects. In order to make cybernetics a full-fledged discipline, he brought together, with the help of neurologist Warren McCulloch, hundreds of scientists during what have been known as *Macy conferences*. Every six months in New York from 1946 to 1953 were gathered mathematicians such as John Von Neumann, psychologists, logicians, practitioners, historians, philosophers, economists, sociologists as well as anthropologists, among whom Claude Lévi-Strauss, Gregory Bateson and

Margaret Mead. Lying behind such a motley gathering of scholars was the willingness to construct a general science addressing the working of the spirit. These scientists believed that cybernetics was this “New Science” able to encapsulate all forms of knowledge in order to promote a broad improvement of human conditions. As Louis Challier put it during the second international cybernetics conference:

“All these men resolutely turned towards the future and who still believe in the human infinite through our search for scientific accuracy, who believe in the Man of Tomorrow, over-developed compared with that of yesterday and already foreshadowed in the Man of Today: it is to them that I extend moved signs of collaborating affection, as associates in a painstaking effort at giving birth to this new Science: CYBERNETICS.”<sup>1</sup>

What such discourse illustrates is the strong willingness to be part of a scientific revolution, and also the way these scientists found a powerful incentive in their profound faith in science and in its capacity to change society.

Such momentum linked to the changes announced by cybernetics is not devoid of an actual form of religiosity. It is indeed “an unwavering mood and foundation of the soul” (Simmel 1998, p111) which that takes the outline of faith. It is characterized, we will see, by a combinaison of “unselfish surrender and fervent desire, [...] of humility and exaltation, of sensual concreteness and spiritual abstraction” (Simmel 1998, pp112-113) lending to its object an autonomy “released into absolute” (Simmel 1998, p48). That is first of all noticeable in Wiener’s primary intention to devise a discipline allowing to “purify science from the nuclear sin”<sup>2</sup>. According to him, the guilt that he associates with the scientific sphere may be absolved through a better use of science which must be combined with broader communication. What he sees in interconnections and unifications of all sorts is a way to foster a complementary state of things and therefore perfection. Communication is construed as a moral duty allowing society to ward off the threat of disorganization and chaos, which he calls “entropy”. This notion borrowed from the laws of thermodynamics entails that “any isolated system tends towards a state of maximum disorder or to the greatest possible uniformity, by slowing and stopping the trade in it”. Whilst drawing inspiration from physical reality, Wiener raises entropy to the level of metaphysical truth by integrating it into a re-theologisation of the world. He considers it as a non-human “evil enemy” which, when regarded in social terms, constitutes a threat to man as well as to social intercourse. For him, the very nature of that enemy is explicitly analogous to the “Augustinian demon” inasmuch as it “is not a power in itself, but the

---

1 See Lafontaine, Céline (2004), 21. Quote from Association internationale de cybernétique, 1960, Actes du 2<sup>o</sup> congrès, 3-10 septembre 1958, Namur.

2 The Wiener's positioning refers to the Oppenheimer's quote about the H-bomb: “Physicists have known now sin” (Bulletin of the atomic scientific, 4, 1948).

measure of our own weakness” (1954, pp41-42). This is why he confers upon scientists the responsibility to do battle against that demon with the aid of communication:

“Communication is the cement of society and those whose works it is to maintain open the lines of communication are the very people upon whom the perpetuation or fall of our civilization chiefly depends” (1954, p183).

More crucially, Wiener gives cybernetics a cosmogonic dimension. He conceives the universe as closed and led by the informational paradigm. He therefore postulates that it is in communication that the source and key to all natural and artificial phenomena may be found. The primacy he grants to information exchange is evocative of an informational monism according to which the nature of the deliverer and the receiver is itself secondary, thereby nullifying the ontological distance between living and non-living, human and machine. For him “to be alive is to participate in a continuous stream of influences from the outer world and acts on the outer world, in which we are merely the transitional stage” (1954, p48). By emphasizing communicational control and by subordinating life to communication, Wiener challenges classical humanism and the principle of humanity. This epistemological revolution, akin to a “Second Renaissance” (Lafontaine 2004, p26), radically transforms the figure and place of the human subject : this subject is not at the centre any longer and has been supplanted by information exchange, which grants as much importance to the machine as it does to man<sup>3</sup>.

The oscillations between the techno-scientific and the metaphysical fields stem from the cosmogonic scope of cybernetics, and from the inclusive and very theoretical character of the working of the universe. As Nathalie Luca makes clear, the transfer of transcendence from religion to science has not worked fully and science’s abusive claim to explain the universe and its workings has proved unable to overcome its own pitfalls (Luca 2008, pp24-25). Ethical thinking on the uses of science and the diverse theories around the working of the spirit have raised more issues than they have arrived at definitive answers. The very general nature of such questionings has therefore bred some explanations which are a blend of theory and speculation, ultimately giving way to metaphysical questionings. This is why upon its founder’s death in 1964, enthusiasm for cybernetics faded away among scientists. Unable to answer all the questions it raised, the science left a void soon to be filled by spirituals and religious aspirations. Thus, whilst conditioned by the knowledge produced by sciences, the reflections bred around the working of the spirit have found some answers within the North-American counterculture as well as within the new religious movements which have been rethinking a world wherein science and spirituality may be reconciled.

---

3 For further reading see Wiener 2000 [1964].



Global consciousness was to appear a few decades later and is part of sets of beliefs which are heirs to the representation of communication as moral duty and to a vision of the world in which each element is connected to all others. Inherently linked to the development of techno-sciences, the Internet has embodied *par excellence* the place of such reconciliation of science and spirituality. The very notion that the spiritual unity of humanity is not only possible through technique but that it also constitutes a shift towards a further step of human evolution is a techno-spiritual reinterpretation of social intercourse, of the centrality of communication and of how complementary man and machine can be. Thus, in order to understand how global consciousness has been thought out, let us study the way cybernetics nourished the imagination of those who invented micro-computing and who apprehended the Internet as a means to create a world community.

### **3 From cosmogony of the mind to global consciousness : the spiritualization of the Internet and techno-eschatology**

The move from the scientific sphere to the counterculture movement would have been impossible without the contribution of social sciences, instrumental in fostering a communicational worldview (Breton & Proulx 2002). In this respect Gregory Bateson's contribution was paramount. Not only to understand how these reflections on the working of the mind have found a continuity, but also in order to grasp the way in which the counterculture has appropriated the ideas of cybernetics by devising a system of thought combining a scientific dimension and religiosity. It is impossible to come to terms with how central interrelation is in global consciousness without dealing primarily with the theoretical contributions of the person considered as "the Renaissance man" (Garcia & Wittezaele 1992, p29). Bateson indeed developed a holistic vision of the mind in which the latter is envisaged as an informational process inextricably bound up to its environment. The mind existing only by and through exchanges, is it not meant to have material bounds. Being open onto the outside, it is meant to become meaningful only through its interaction with other systems. As the anthropologist tells us:

"The individual mind is immanent but not only in the body. It is immanent also in the pathways and messages outside the body; and there is a larger Mind of which the individual mind is only a sub-system. This larger Mind is comparable to God and is perhaps what some people mean by 'God', but it is still immanent in the total interconnected social system and planetary ecology" (1999, p467).

The mind is here apprehended as an information influx, it no longer is tied in to the unicity of thought but to exchange, interrelation, complementariness and totality. Germane here is Wiener's

influence, according to whom the notion of individuality is now irrelevant, having been ousted by the supremacy of exchanged information. That epistemological u-turn, informed by a profound faith in the virtues of communication, was to be instrumental in shaping the utopias of some world community, linked as these were with the spread of IT. It is in this way that the countercultural concepts of ‘collective intelligence’ and ‘global consciousness’ are heirs to this mode of thinking.

Concomitantly, computing and network technologies emancipated from the scientific and military fields. The late 1950s coincided with the beginnings of large-scale computer sales, and the next decade with the development of the Internet, with distinct computers being connected together for the first time in 1969<sup>4</sup>. It was then that California’s intellectual and scientific elites, influenced by a libertarian ideal of knowledge sharing, appropriated themselves these new media. Made up of people bringing together the technophile youth of Berkeley and the psychedelic counterculture, these groups freed themselves from the technocratic yoke by mastering technological breakthroughs in order to think out a meeting space, a space of sharing and of collective invention. Among these would be found people such as Timothy Leary<sup>5</sup>, Steward Brand<sup>6</sup> or Howard Rheingold<sup>7</sup>. The political element in their action was necessarily bound up with the spiritual ambition that served as an incentive for them. Moved by a veritable faith in techno-scientific progress, these were advocates of hippie culture and nourished a strong interest in oriental philosophies. They also shared a common willingness to explore the confines of the mind. Computing embodied for them the possibility to gain access to a transcendent universe of disincarnation, allowing a psychic union otherwise than using psychotropic drugs. At a time when the hippie movement was on the wane, leading to some political dead-ends, computers according to Stewart Brand opened onto “a free way leading to climes we wouldn’t even dream of” (Dery 1997, p37). Such cyberspace pioneers were both advocates of social changes and influenced by a pro-technological spiritualism, and to them techno-sciences were a means to transcend humanity. Alongside members of new religious movements, such as the *New Age* one, they shared the notion that humanity is moving forward to a

---

4 It connected four universities : the Stanford Institute, University of California at Los Angeles, University of California at Santa Barbara and University of Utah.

5 Timothy Leary (1920-1996) was an american writer and psychologist who has taught psychology at Berkeley and Harvard. Considered as one of the great figures of the counterculture, he considered new technology as a good way to explore the mind. He believed in “therapeutic and spiritual benefits” of LSD. He leaded research to explore the cultural and philosophical implications of hallucinogenic drugs and wanted to prove that LSD, properly dosed, could have beneficial effects on the mind by “opening consciousness”.

6 Stewart Brand is an american writer. He is best known as editor of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, an encyclopedic collection of tools, texts and informations. He also creates the *WELL*, one of the oldest virtual communities. The importance of its role in the Internet’s development is brilliantly explained by Turner, Fred (2006) *From counterculture to cyberculture, Stewart Brand, the whole earth network and the rise of digital utopianism*, The University of Chicago Press.

7 Howard Reinhgold is a critique and an american teacher. He has contributed to the development of the *WELL*. His specialities are on NTIC’s social, cultural and political implications. He is considered as a reference in virtual communities and online interactions.

“paradigm shift”, some imminent new dawn, sometimes called “the age of Aquarius”, where spirit would supplant matter.

The beginnings of Internet access for civil society in the late 1970s generated reactions which were analogous to those brought about by computing. Potential communication with somebody else at the other end of the planet and instantaneous access to many forms of knowledge, without having to deal with the traditional legitimating channels of knowledge, made cyberspace a whole new land to be conquered. The reception of this system allowing to interconnect individuals through a computing system must be considered through the lens of a new discourse on religion and media philosophy (Krueger 2007, p139). In the main, the Internet is thought to broaden intellectual horizons, enhanced intelligence and to have an impact on the spiritual evolution of humanity. Olivier Krueger has shown that some interpretations of the Internet are largely informed by a discourse on the evolution and the global history of humanity, or on the cosmological history of the universe. He thus explains that “ontological patterns of interpretation include to a greater or lesser extent metaphysical assumptions on the nature of the Internet and the common notion of virtual reality” (2007, p140). These interpretations, sometimes called “cybergnosis” or “techgnosis” (Davis 1998), illustrate the creative dimension of the Internet according to the post-modern media philosophy, and rest upon the promise of “the dawn of a new age with the prophecy that a religious interpretation of an actual transformation of humankind” (2007, p141). Therefore, Internet pioneers, by announcing the end of the material world and by construing the advent of cyberspace as a “New Eden”, partake of the shaping of a millenarist representation of the Internet. From the outset, this dimension was a paramount aspect of discourses on this medium. Tom Furness, a researcher who created the *Human Interface Technology Laboratory* at the University of Washington, explains has it that when we log on the Internet:

“we become creatures of colored light in motion, pulsing with golden particles... We will all becomes angels, and for eternity... Cyberspace will feel like Paradise... a space for collective restoration [of the] habit of perfection” (Stenger 1992, p52).

Theologian Jennifer Cobb sees the Internet as a boundless space for the development of intellectual, spiritual and emotional potentials of humanity. According to her, “Cyberspace can help guide us toward a reconciliation of the major schisms of our time, those between science and spirit, between the organic world and the world that we create” (1998, p43). Much in the same way, when Stewart Brand, Howard Rheingold and John Perry Barlow created the WELL in 1985, which was the ancestor of discussion forums, the aim was to make it an instrument of social and spiritual renewal. According to Antonio Casilli these people would see computer networks as “instruments for the rebirth of an authentic community spirit” (2010, p51), whilst convinced that “computers would contribute to the social integration and psychological development of tomorrow’s citizens” (2010,

p50). Consequently, WELL's community experience -beyond initiating reflections on unprecedented communicational potentialities- is regarded as allowing a "New Renaissance" ushering in a new age for humanity. These interpretations of the nature of the Internet and its millenarist scope stem from what Heidi Campbell calls the "spiritualization of the media" (2005). In other words, this is a trend that mobilizes the Internet in order to apprehend it according to a religious interpretative model.

David Noble explains that the tendency to see new technologies as a means to build a new community and to elevate the soul is actually nothing new in a Judeo-Christian context (1999, p12). In the 1990s, which coincided with American massification of Internet use, some started to believe that this medium would allow the creation of a "conscious and collective organ" transcending individuals and their thoughts. Better known as "global consciousness", this belief is largely informed by the communicational imperative drawn from cybernetics. On the one hand, it rests on the theory according to which technique is able to transfigure humanity by unifying it spiritually ; on the other hand, such unification is seen as the sign of "the Mind Realm". It is within the counterculture, and more specifically within Cyberdelia, that this belief set in. The cyberdelic movement, which conflates "cybernetics" and "psychedelic", brings together hackers, ravers, techno-pagans and *New Age* technophiles. Members of these groups would seek "Nirvana" in computing and their specificity has been to reconcile "the 1960s counterculture with the 1990s computing mania and *New Age* millenarist mysticism" (Dery 1997, p32). These people apprehend the Internet as a space wherein individual consciences come to meet. Mobilizing the entirety of thoughts passing through cyberspace and creating a communicational continuity wherein a communion of spirits operates, what the Internet embodies is a world electronic Agora giving birth to a "humanity in continuum" (Casilli 2010). Therefore, for the members of cyber-culture, cyberspace as a space of exchange is the source of an intellectual and spiritual unification which allows for a "techno-transcendent" experiencing of community. Global consciousness, as stemming from the fusion of man and machine, is considered as the opening gate into an unprecedented communicational era, the first step towards the realization of a divine entity made up of the collective human spirit. It is therefore a religious interpretation of evolution, an evolutionist discourse promising the dawn of a new age and prophesying a wholesale transformation of mankind.

This interpretation owes a great deal to the works of Jesuit theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. The 'noosphere' concept he developed, also known as "sphere of human thought", is a holistic and evolutionist theory reconciling religious aspiration and science. It rests upon the idea that humanity converges towards a step of evolution itself leading to a new stage which he calls "noogenesis". What would be remarkable about this phase is the harmonization and unification of consciousnesses. This is meant to occur in the "noosphere" which is, according to Teilhard de

Chardin an outer layer of thought around the earth, and made up of human communications. It is characterized by the convergence of all individual consciousnesses, thereby creating a “supra-personal consciousness” (1956, p331). At the dawn of Internet massification, the noosphere had a major appeal to cyberculture, whose members saw it as a prophecy of the Internet<sup>8</sup>. Teilhard de Chardin’s ideas couldn’t have enjoyed vast influence had it not been for the contribution of Marshall McLuhan’s thought<sup>9</sup>. What can be tracked down to McLuhan is the religious undertone of the history of evolution *via* technology and the way he posits that the great stages in history are connected to the development of communication techniques. Such an interpretation has been possible by a lexical transfer away from religion and onto technical vocabulary. McLuhan has contextualized noosphere as a media and technology word by making it ‘the global village’ and by reading “the outer layer of thought” around the earth as an “electronic brain”. According to him, the global village:

“could create the universality of consciousness foreseen by Dante when he predicted that men would continue as no more than broken fragments until they were unified into an inclusive consciousness.”<sup>10</sup>

What this stand underlines is that McLuhan has not entirely stripped Teilhard de Chardin’s works of their spiritual dimension and hasn’t transformed them into a technicizing discourse. If anything, McLuhan’s stand illustrates how the two dimensions are interwoven in his thought. This is an approach which was bound to be re-appropriated by cyberculture, whose members have interpreted the ‘global village’ as a metaphorical prophecy of cyberspace.

The potentialities offered by virtual worlds have made believable the dreams of transcending matter and spirit in a single place and in the present. Ultimately, this quest for spiritual uplifting mediated by technique illustrates a social wish for a rapprochement of science and religion (Champion 1993). The bringing together of these two routinely opposed domains looks, for the members of the counterculture, like an opening door into a new era. This belief at least partly stems from the fact that it serves to complement instrumental reasoning, inasmuch as it entails a spiritual support normally neglected by technology. Technique itself then helps to bolster beliefs by catering to the need of community renewal and of a redefinition of the self which is sought for by the counterculture. Some cyber-philosophers thus construe the Internet’s emergence and the advent of computers as a sign of a new level of consciousness in the history of evolution : the level that

---

8 This is Mark Pesce, in 1990's, who has presented Teilhard de Chardin as the prophet of the Internet. See also: Pesce, Mark (2000), *The Playful World: How Technology is Transforming our Imagination*, NY: Ballantine Books, Primavesi, New York.

9 About links between entre Marshall McLuhan & Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, see Krueger, 2007.

10 “The Playboy interview : Marshall McLuhan”, march 1969, Playboy, p. 72.

unifies humanity. Pierre Levy, for instance, takes a secular interpretation of the religious reception of the Internet by positing that cyberspace is a metaphor of a free and equal humanity which realizes the illumination of global intelligence (1994, p100). In this way the Internet seems to partake of the production of some collective identity that claims itself as a world identity. To this respect, Manuel Castells writes that “In a world of global flows of wealth, power, and images, the search for identity, collective or individual, ascribed or constructed, becomes the fundamental source of social meaning” (2010, p3). Armand Mattelart states that post-modern utopias dealing with some equalitarian global village are crucial in order to construct meaning in societies which are submerged in a flow of information (2000). Oliver Krueger goes further by explaining that the Internet appeared at a time which was remarkably devoid of any common myth, thereby making the medium itself the narrator of a media-based society (2007, p131). Consequently, global consciousness embodies certain aspects of the communitarian ideal and of the religious utopia of universal community (2007, p166). By celebrating unity, global consciousness may be interpreted as an allegory of globalization. Be they secular or spiritual, the interpretations of global consciousness and of collective intelligence hark back in both cases to some utopia of universal community. The ambivalence of interpretations is edifying in order to make sense of the shifts at the heart of the beliefs around global consciousness emerging at the dawn of the new millennium. The most important of these, and the most astonishing, is that hybridizing capitalism and millenarianism which utilizes global consciousness as a tool in order to anticipate the future, the way the stock exchange evolves and indeed the end of the world itself.

#### 4 Uses of global consciousness : on anticipating the future

By the second half of the 1990s belief in global consciousness was on the wane. This put paid to the concept of a fusion with cyberspace, a belief by now substituted by a more consumerist and individualistic ideology geared on the “here and now”. But the notion of a unification of spirits and minds reappeared at the dawn of the 2000s in order to fulfill a specific goal for global consciousness, i.e. a computer-aided anticipation of the future.

This practice was initiated by Terrence McKenna back in the 1970s. A high-profile member of the counterculture as well as disciple of Timothy Leary, McKenna devised a software, *Timewave Zero*, whose aim was to make sense of the course of events and to anticipate the future. By basing himself on a numerological formula drawn from *Yi King*<sup>11</sup>, McKenna strives to demonstrate the

---

11 The *Yi king* is a chinese divination book also known as the *Book of Changes*. Based on a set of oracular statements represented by hexagrams and trigrams, its purpose is to describe the states of the world and their trends.

numerical regularities among the great events of human History. He is reported to have found out a convergence between the long Mayan calendar and 2012, a year which according to him would coincide with the end of a whole cycle (McKenna & McKenna 1975). Such a link between techno-sciences, divination and end of the world would find a specific continuity in cyber-culture and among other developments in techno-paganism. Founded in the late 1980s, this trend is the offspring of Californian counterculture, of the *New Age* wave and of digital technologies. It regards the alliance of science and religion as a means to transcend man. Computers, and above all the Internet, are for techno-pagans a very effective way to reach this by trust in “the hidden powers of the human brain”. Adi Newton, the singer of the Clock DVA band, explains in an interview that:

“[O]ccult technology is already with us. The computer is really a 20<sup>th</sup> century oracle we employ to forecast the future... Science... has always [sought] to simulate the occult, gain control over nature... [S]cience is now discovering what the mystics already knew.”<sup>12</sup>

This is an apt illustration of the type of mindset at the root of predictive software, whilst also foreshadowing how these would be received among the cyber-culture.

## 5 The Global Consciousness Project

The Global Consciousness Project (GCP) appeared in the 1990s at the well-known and New Age *Esalen Institute*. Is as such the oldest software mobilizing the notion of global consciousness. This research program at the margins of science was developed by Princeton and the Institute of Noetic Sciences<sup>13</sup>. At the crossroads between psychology and physics, this experimental project rests on an international collaboration of researchers taking an interest in all the potentialities of consciousness. The project’s goal was to demonstrate scientifically, but by starting from esoteric postulates, the noosphere’s existence and to seek to gauge its manifestations in the physical world in an attempt to prove that mind does exert an influence on matter.

The technical scheme used for this is called “electrogaiagram”. This measures, second by second, “the earth’s state of mind”. In order to do so, a range of random number generators (RNGs) have been spread throughout the world. For each of them, the tests of random numbers have been recorded continually, with a test each second since 1992. The results are connected back to social,

---

12 Quoted in Riley, Matthew F. “Clock DVA: Energy Tending to Change” in *Technology Works*, unnumbered, unpaginated issue.

13 Founded in 1973 by the astronaut Edgar Mitchell, the institute focuses its research on the potentials and powers of consciousness.

economic and environmental events taking place at the same time. According to Roger Nelson, director of the GCP, these events have a significant influence on evaluating instruments. For instance, the tests reveal a repetition of the same numbers just before New Year's Eve, 9/11, or Lady Diana's death. This phenomenon is very likely to prove that there is a correlation between the results of the generator and "human consciousness interconnected at global level". How do GCP researchers account for this correlation?

According to them, certain events lead individuals to think about the same things and therefore to share similar emotions. This presumably accounts for the similarity in data gathered at events which emotionally engage individuals (such as concerts, rituals, etc.). The correlation is reported to be all the stronger at events generating emotions based on "interpersonal connection" such as compassion and at events which are lasting ones. This is construed as evidence of the interconnection of consciousnesses. It is alleged to prove the existence of a synchrony of thoughts and of their influence at the "quantum level". In other words, according to GCP's researchers when individuals think about the same thing, some effects on the physical world are actually perceptible, here on the series of numbers in the RNGs.

The GCP is not merely content with registering the "the subtle first sparks of consciousness in a global mind" (Nelson 2002). By detecting the "signs of a world awareness" (Nelson n.d), it seeks to influence the course of events. Following in the footsteps of Teilhard de Chardin, Roger Nelson considers the planet as a living, potentially conscious organ which is bound to awake with the union of human thoughts. In that respect, his appreciation of the Internet is interesting since he labels this medium as "a lively, growing, practically organic entity in itself -- with considerable similarity in many respects to Teilhard's noosphere" (2002). This project, by proving the existence of "a subtle but pervasive, nonlocal interconnection that is manifested by mind and consciousness" (2002), is meant to confirm what the theologian argued about the future and the goal of humanity. Therefore, convinced that we live in an interconnected and potentially conscious world, the team of researchers share the postulate according to which mind can act on matter. Inspired by the Batesonian representation of the mind, these researchers apprehend consciousness as a channel delivering information, a channel which should be exploited in order to change the course of events. In this regard, each would have an important role to fulfill : "the future is ours to mold [...]it will be a desirable future in proportion to our level of consciousness, individually and globally" (Nelson 2002). Through their commitment, the GCP team purport to speed up entry into the era of the spirit of which Teilhard de Chardin talked. Nevertheless, this upcoming era is not meant to emerge in cyberspace or online but in the offline world.



## 6 The WebBot Project

The GCP's technicized eschatology has bred other projects around global consciousness and around the necessity to anticipate the future in order to have some grasp on the course of history. Such is the case for the WebBot Project.

More mediatized than the GCP, WebBot took shape in the U.S. from 1997 to 2012. This is a computing program developed by two men, Clif High and George Ure, who also call themselves "the Time monks". On the basis of an esoteric and mathematical treatment of written data circulating through the Internet, WebBot measures the "global emotional context"<sup>14</sup> in order to foresee events to come. Primarily devised for the personal use of its conceiver -whose original wish was to anticipate the tendencies of stock markets-, the anticipation scope of the software was slowly enlarged to all kinds of events. In 2001, the program took on a public and lucrative dimension when Clif High declared that his software had predicted the 9/11 attacks as early as June of the same year. The statements fuelling this *post eventum* interpretation are the following : "a life-altering event" for Americans would take place in the next "60 to 90 days". The attacks were a tipping point in the software's use. It was indeed since Clif High's declaration that WebBot became renowned and that predictive reports became commercialized. Since that date, social and political events (terrorist attacks, political or economic crises) but also geophysical ones (tsunamis, earthquakes) have been announced. Clif High goes so far as to say that the 2003 north-American East-coast blackout, the 2004 tsunami in the Indian ocean, Katrina in 2005 and more recently the 2008 subprime crisis, the 2010 BP offshore drilling rig accident in the Gulf of Mexico as well as the nuclear tragedy at Fukushima in 2011 were all predicted by WebBot.

The nearly-systematic enumeration of these predictions serves to highlight how 'efficient' the software is and therefore to bolster the believability of the one prediction which would make WebBot extremely famous, *viz.* the predicted end of the world in 2012. The 2003 data from the software which were construed as forebodings of the end of the world were that "an alignment, in 2012, of the elliptical plane of the Milky Way" would take place and that "some unknown energy from space" would manifest itself. Facing predictions which place the individual in an environment on which he/she has no hold, the Time monks suggest an individual handling of these events which have an impact on the whole. They thus sell their anticipation reports, their financial advice on stock exchange speculation but also varied material salvation goods, such as books on survival techniques, plans for the building of unsinkable boats, of low cost bunkers, etc. How did they devise such a techno-eschatological universe ? How does global consciousness fit in this scheme?

---

14 For an accurate analysis of how the WebBot Project works, see Calheiros 2012.

The WebBot Project's fame rests upon the participation in an already existing millenarist framework, the re-appropriation of an apocalyptic imagery harking back to classic themes in Christian eschatology and upon the legitimation of the technical legitimation of predictions. On the one hand, the prime data were presented in such a way as to appeal to a public already attuned and ready to hear such predictions. The year 2012 was evocative of the end of the long Mayan calendar and as such represented the end of a cycle. The "alignment of the elliptical plane of the Milky Way" was a reference to the New Age theory announcing that the planets of the galaxy would align and that that rare cosmic event would beget unheard-of cataclysms<sup>15</sup>. On the other hand, the way the prediction was inserted in the documentary entitled *Doomsday 2012 : The End of Days* (produced by *History Channel*) and its broadcast to a massive online audience greatly boosted its fame among a large public, as well as among a more specific one<sup>16</sup>. The documentary presented motley apocalyptic prophecies, such as the Mayan calendar or Saint-John's Apocalypse. It converged their predictions towards the end of 2012. WebBot was therein hailed as the most recent prophet, the "numerical prophet" of the digital age confirming the validity of all preceding prophecies. Being the union of man and of the machine's scientific rigor, what made WebBot different was not that its prophecies were inspired by the divine word of God, but that it was capable of generating predictions inspired by whispers circulating on the Internet and finally seized upon by a computer.

The WebBot project is therefore an apocalyptic movement taking its place among the new socio-religious movements of the mystical-esoteric trend. On his blog called *Half Past Human, Adventures on Future Viewing*, Clif High displays his fondness for contemporary esotericism, for conspiracy theories, for Oriental philosophies and technophile values. The combinations therein made display a form of *bricolage* between religious tradition, *New Age* philosophy, occultism, science and political radicalism. The millenarist thinking at the heart of his project may also be called "improvisational millenarism" since it is independent from any ideological tradition and is characterized by variations on (or deviations from) sacred texts.

How idiosyncratic the software's working is dovetails with the cultural tastes of the web-communities that follow it. For the designers, the aggregation of big data and their analysis are believed to give access to the very contents of global consciousness, itself holding messages allowing to anticipate the future. According to Clif High, language is meant to have some unfathomed potential allowing to make predictions on events to come. In some unconscious way,

---

15 This theory was so successful that NASA was forced to deny it.

16 The massive broadcast of this documentary on Western channels and Internet between 2006 and 2012, has largely contributed to the high visibility of WebBot Project on mass media. For example, it has been posted on various video hosting websites (Youtube, Dailymotion, etc.) and translated into several languages including French, Spanish, Russian and Arabic, broadcasting internationally the eschatological WebBot prediction. Samples from this documentary were also included in the French docudrama '2012, the conspiracy of the Apocalypse' broadcast on national channels *France 4*. This documentary was rebroadcast at least 5 times a year on French television between 2009 and 2012 on *TNT*.

individuals would be interconnected spiritually in the present *via* the “noosphere”. What’s more, time would not be linear, which might allow our “future we-s” to unconsciously deliver messages to our “present we-s”, thereby accounting for each individual’s propensity to broach this or that topic. The WebBot is therefore a research into the influence of future time upon the present through the synchronicity of conversations. The designers argue that if changes are perceptible at the individual level, the same holds true at a larger scale. The Internet is the most suited place for that : what it embodies is a virtual meta-brain simulating the convergence of individual consciousnesses, generating a humanity which is a boundless continuum, giving access to a massive and international production of written documents. What distinguishes the software is a specific rhetoric bringing together a techno-scientific register to devise a model for the future and an esoteric register to unveil its very working. In a digital technology-dominated world, the capacity to master computing in order to decode the future has made WebBot a recognized pioneer in this specific field. The mobilization of truth programs classically opposed by rationalism took on its full meaning among members of the counterculture fascinated by the esoteric aspects of science.

By 2006, belief in the WebBot project became more complex. The apocalyptic element blended with a salvation perspective based upon the leader’s injunctions, summoning each person to control their thoughts in order to influence the course of events and thus to avoid the end of the world. With this project, Clif High and George Ure managed to gather numerous virtual communities around them. A typological analysis<sup>17</sup> of more than 150 North-American and French websites on WebBot reveal, in ideal-typical fashion, three main profiles of virtual communities adhering to the predictive and eschatological dimension of the WebBot project. These are:

1. The *New Age* websites on contemporary esotericism. Magic and technology are therein regarded as similar. According to these, the WebBot project illustrates this similarity. Moreover, these websites adhere to the theory that 2012 is a hallmark into a new era, and the software is apprehended by them as a complementary argument amongst the multitude of existing theories;
2. The technophile websites more or less buying into conspiracy theories. Here, it is the technical dimension which appeals to people. These are particularly interested in the production of predictive statements and to the measure of “humanity’s global emotion” by a software;

---

17 This research realised by the author was made between 2011 and 2012. It was first to identify and list the sites, forums and blogs English (USA and UK) and French (France, Canada, Belgium and Switzerland ) dealing with WebBot Project. In a second step, it was to establish a network of these sites and blogs from Gephi software. The keywords used for the searches were “WebBot Project”, “Projet WebBot”, “Apocalypse”, “end of the world”, “forecasting software”, “Clif High”, “George Ure”.

3. The Websites on apocalypse in 2012 and on various correlated prophecies. The WebBot project is therein regarded as a form of artificial intelligence announcing Apocalypse. The project's (apparent) scientificity is mobilized to legitimate the pre-existing postulate of a sure-to-happen end of the world.

WebBot has been considered by these web-communities, at least up until a few months before the announced end of the world for December 2012, as an “oracle”, a “numerical prophet”, “a hallmark in the figures of prophets, who had hitherto been human beings”. What they shared was some initial common interest in eschatology, in new technologies and in the spiritual uses to be made of that. These communities therefore gathered around the strong expectation of change and around the alternative and groundbreaking use of WebBot. Nevertheless, adherence did not reach beyond the frontiers of cyberspace. Believers would not have strong links, neither with one another nor with the leader. The originality of these interrelations is characteristic of Internet 2.0 and of the forms of sociability made possible by it, i.e. the capacity to establish links with other Internet users exclusively on specific interests, links which can be made or unmade very swiftly. These communities being virtual, personal involvement in them is not as constraining as involvement in a not-on line community, wherein links and adherence are bound to be stronger. Rather experienced at the individual level in the offline world, and with clear ups-and-downs, adherence to WebBot's predictive statements gradually disappeared as 2012 evolved. This is why as opposed to the apocalyptic group analyzed by Festinger, the communities around the WebBot did not have to deal with the cognitive dissonances effects inevitably taking place when the prophecy fails (Festinger, Riecken & Schachter 1993).

## 7 Conclusion

Global consciousness is a belief whose working gives a main role to social interaction, and which apprehends the spiritual unity of humanity as a further stage of evolution. This belief crystallized around techno-sciences, which fuelled a new global representation of the world. Having passed through the mysteries of science, the informational paradigm constitutes the theoretical framework allowing to envisage information exchange as a necessary step for the survival of humanity. The seeds of such thinking thereafter found a fertile ground in the counterculture, which bred the wish to reinvest the collective world by technique. The Internet thus appeared as the one tool allowing to transcend individualities by aggregating thoughts. It is the numerical link generating communicational continuity and therefore a communion. Networking is endowed with a strong symbolical value since it has satisfied the necessity to unify forms of knowledge and individuals

with a view to bring about an overall improvement of human condition. The stress laid upon inter-relations therefore illustrates the need for continuity among beings, thereby allowing to place man in a totality again. The Internet, in this context, serves as a passage between entities, worlds and temporalities.

What is peculiar about the predictive software presented here is that they bring together global consciousness, anticipation of the future and of the end of the world. That this divinatory practice should have appeared at all illustrates not only the shifts in the belief in global consciousness but also how central technique is among the counterculture. For Erik Davis, the mystical and millenarist enthusiasm brought about by each means of communication reveals a peculiar rapport to technology (1998). In the present case, willingness to explore the unknown climes of cyberspace bears witness to the cultural integration within which this belief established itself. On the one hand, conferring a sacred dimension to cyberspace and wanting to control the environment by anticipating the future both partake of a phenomenon described as re-enchanting the world through technique, which is specific to the counterculture. On the other hand, this illustrates the significance of reflexive modernity inasmuch as the unknown, *viz* the future, is fraught with certain potential risks one needs to master and therefore to anticipate. The predictive software designers therefore seek to come to terms with what is ungraspable -the future- and suggest means to master it. In the WebBot's project case, global consciousness ultimately served an utilitarian and mercantile end through the sale of anticipation reports announcing in various ways some "imminent end of the world", and the sale of material salvation goods to survive that.

The millenarist dimension of global consciousness therefore adapted itself to a context in which the Internet is no longer a peculiar world unto itself but really the "continuity of the offline world in the online world" (Casilli 2010). An Internet user thus describes the WebBot project:

"For the first time, science is about to demonstrate and validate the existence of egregores, ie the collective unconsciousness, and possibly its tangible power over the real course of History."<sup>18</sup>

Another says:

"People can influence events at a quantum level. Our minds exist outside of time, they do things they should not be able to do in the physical world. Human thought can change reality. How do you think that prayers work?"<sup>19</sup>

---

18 <http://www.neotrouve.com/>. Comment posted on the website the 2nd August 2009 at 10h36 PM. Viewed the 12 february 2011.

19 <http://www.aphroditeastrology.com/>. Comment posted on the website the 7 October 2008 at 12h40. Viewed the 3 March 2011.

The spiritual interconnection of individuals as a teleological focus therefore remains central but becomes a tool allowing to improve the capacities of action of individuals by decrypting the future. By postulating an effect of the mind upon matter, the software designers confer a certain agency to thought and a role to each individual as regards the future of humanity. Their vision is one in which the unity of humanity has the power to swing the world into the “noosphere”. That argument places the individual in a responsibility position vis-à-vis his/her thoughts and therefore vis-à-vis the future of humanity. It gives interrelation an essential dimension in so far as the evolution of humanity would only be possible *via* such social connectedness and *via* these converging thoughts largely amplified by technique. But if the beginnings of computing and the Internet have spawned millenarist utopias expressing the wish for an “as yet unmaterialized world, but a passionately yearned for one” (Bloch 1977), massive use of these media, or even the practical advent of these utopias, have absorbed a great deal of their radicality (Hervieu-Léger 1993, p215). Consequently, even though those who adhere to the statements made in predictive software think of the interconnection of thoughts as truthful and not as a form of speculative projection, there is nonetheless a noticeable secularization of discourses around global consciousness. The French representative of the WebBot project thus tells me:

“Take a web chat situation. With that you can almost have a conversation from thought to thought. I don’t even need my eyes to speak. It is a thought that goes through your hands, goes through the Web and onto the person at the other end, his / her hands and then brain. The fact of being linked with that via the Internet, you’ve got all of everybody’s thoughts being centralized in servers, all this common thinking being interconnected with one another online. There’s like a common pool of thought online and it’s not so bad because it makes us evolve more quickly since we get other people’s influence on us.”<sup>20</sup>

The utopias giving the cybersphere the capacity to unify the spirits of disembodied individuals have faded away and been supplanted by beliefs on materiality and immanence. The end of the material world, perceived in the fusion with cyberspace, has transformed into the end of the offline world as announced by cyberspace. The use of global consciousness has therefore been geared towards predictions dealing solely with offline life. Positivism, specifically of the scientific kind, at stake in the rhetoric developed by predictive software designers has fuelled the notion that access to immortality is perhaps not impossible after all. Consequently, and more recently, speculations on heaven within cyberspace and on man potentially being improved spiritually have been supplanted by expectations of a humanity being enhanced physically. Promoted by a transhuman trend which is also the counterculture’s offspring, such expectations invite us to ponder over the shifts at work

---

20 Semi-structured interview conducted the 29 October 2012 at Neuilly-sur-Seine.

today in the expectations *vis-à-vis* the end of man. Technical improvements connected to the project bolster these beliefs and make the utopia a practiced one. An illustration may be found in the “singularity” sought after by transhumanism through research programs such as *Google Brain*. Thus, even though this technical utopia that started off with alchemy is today stripped of any spiritual terminology, it still remains a fact that this quest for the infinite is not devoid of religiosity.

## Bibliography

Bateson, Gregory (1999): *Step to an ecology of mind, Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*, The university of Chicago Press.

Beck, Ulrich (2001): *La société du risque, sur la voie d'une autre modernité*, Paris, Éditions Aubier.

Bloch, Ernest (1977): *Le principe Espérance*, Paris, Gallimard.

Breton, Philippe & Proulx, Serge (2002): *L'explosion de la communication à l'aube du xx<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, La Découverte.

Calheiros, Cecilia (2012): “How to create an eschatological prophecy through cybernetics: the case WebBot Project case.” In: *Raisons politiques*, n° 48 (2012/4), pp. 51-63.

Campbell, Heidi (2005): “Spiritualising the Internet: Uncovering Discourses and Narratives of Religious Internet Usage.” In: *Online-Heidelberg journal of Religions on the Internet*, vol 1.1, special issue on theory and methodology pp. 1-8.

Casilli, Antonio (2010): *Les liaisons numériques. Vers une nouvelle sociabilité?* Paris, Seuil.

Castells, Manuel (2010): *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture. Volume 1: The Rise of The Network Society*, Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell.

Champion, Françoise (1993): “La Croyance en l'Alliance de la science et de la religion dans les nouveaux courants mystiques et ésotériques.” In: *Archives des sciences sociales des religions*, n°82, pp. 205-222.

Cobb, Jennifer (1998): *Cybergrace: The Search for God in the Digital World*, New York, Crown.

Davis, Erik (1998): *Techgnosis. Myth, Magic & Mysticism in the Age of Information*, New York, Five Star.

Dery, Mark (1997): *Vitesse virtuelle. La cyberculture aujourd'hui*, Paris, Abbeville Press.

Festinger, Leon, Riecken, Henry, Schachter, Stanley (1993): *L'échec d'une prophétie. Psychologie sociale d'un groupe de fidèles qui prédisaient la fin du monde*, Paris, PUF.

Garcia, Maria-Teresa & Wittezaele, Jean-Jacques (1992): *À la recherche de l'école de Palo Alto*, Paris, Seuil.

Hervieu-Léger, Danièle (1993): *La religion pour mémoire*, Paris, Cerf.

Krueger, Oliver (2007): "Gaia, God, and the Internet. The History of Evolution and the Utopia of Community in Media Society." In: *Nvmen-International Review for the History of Religion*, n°54 (2/2007), pp. 138-173.

Lafontaine, Céline (2004): *L'empire cybernétique. Des machines à penser à la pensée machine*, Paris, Seuil.

Levy, Pierre (1994): *L'intelligence collective. Pour une anthropologie du cyberspace*, Paris, La Découverte.

Luca, Nathalie (2008): *Individus et pouvoirs face aux sectes*, Paris, Armand Colin.

Mattelard, Armand (2000): *Histoire de l'utopie planétaire. De la cité prophétique à la société globale*, Paris, La Découverte.

McKenna, Denis & McKenna, Terrence (1975): *The Invisible Landscape: Mind, Hallucinogens, and the I Ching*, New York, Seabury.

Noble, David F. (1999) : *The religion of technology. The divinity of man and the spirit of invention*, London, Penguin books.

Simmel, Georg (1998) [1912] : *La religion*, Circé.

Stenger, Nicole (1992) : "Mind Is a Leaking Rainbow." In: Benedikt, M. L *Cyberspace : First Steps*, Cambridge, The MIT Press.

Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre (1956) : *Le phénomène humain*, Paris, Seuil.

Turner, Fred (2006) : *From counterculture to cyberculture, Steward Brand, the whole earth network and the rise of digital utopianism*, The University of Chicago Press.

Wiener, Norbert (2000) [1964] : *God & Golem inc. Sur quelques points de collision entre cybernétique et religion*, Éditions de l'éclat, Nîmes.

-- (1954) : *Cybernétique et société. L'usage humain des êtres humains*, Paris, 10/18.



## Internet sources

Aphrodite: <http://www.aphroditeastrology.com/> viewed 3 march 2011.

Néotrouve: <http://www.neotrouve.com/> viewed 12 february 2011.

Nelson, Roger (2002): Gathering a global mind: <http://noosphere.princeton.edu/story.html> viewed 25 July 2014.

Nelson, Roger, <http://noosphere.princeton.edu/papers/gathering.pdf> viewed 25 July 2014. Undated

## Biography

CECILIA CALHEIROS is Ph.D candidate in sociology at EHESS-Paris (Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales). She works at the CEIFR (centre d'études interdisciplinaires du fait religieux) under the direction of Nathalie Luca (CEIFR-EHESS) and Anne-Sophie Lamine (University of Strasbourg and EHESS). Her research aimed at comparing two practiced utopias (transhumanism and the use of predictive softwares) linked to technosciences and the role of technological innovations in beliefs on enhanced humanity. Her specialization is on modern media, eschatology, religious use of new media and articulations between sciences and beliefs. She has published article on *Raisons politiques* and a chapter in *Présages, prophéties et fins du monde. De l'Antiquité au XXIe siècle* (François Pernot, 2014).

Cecilia Calheiros  
EHESS-Paris  
Centre d'études interdisciplinaire du fait religieux  
ATER Université Paris Est-Créteil  
[cecilia.calhe@gmail.com](mailto:cecilia.calhe@gmail.com)

# **‘Okhti’<sup>1</sup> Online**

## **Spanish Muslim Women engaging online Jihad – a Facebook case study**

Claudia Carvalho

### **Abstract**

Virtual reality is becoming increasingly relevant as an online space where Muslim women gain a new religious and social role by accepting the expression of Jihad through violence. Until now, the study of online radicalization in Spain has been focusing in the male perspective therefore it is important to analyze Muslim women online Jihadism participation. Facebook due to its easy, cheap access and interactive way of connecting with other people through a virtual channel is growing in popularity among Muslim women in Spain.

As so, it is important to examine how women understand Jihad in a general manner, how they live and enact Jihad on Facebook, how do they embrace the Jihadist recruitment online and most importantly how to they transfer this role from online to offline reality.

### **Keywords**

Salafi-Jihadism, online jihad, online ritualization, virtual sisterhood, Hijra, Facebook

## **1 Introduction**

‘Okhti’ online is a virtual sisterhood aiming first to share and spread Jihadist contents, secondly to support the Jihadist conflict scenarios and thirdly to become a Jihadist fighter. Jihad is perceived and performed by Spanish Muslim women on Facebook under their feminine perspective, as sisters, mothers, wives and as women. Despite the feminine aspect, violence is present through photos, images and videos but also through comments and declarations. These declarations sign their

---

1 ‘Okhti’ is the most used Arabic transliteration of ‘my sister’ by my informants on Facebook.

intention to transfer their online Jihadists performances into real war scenarios. Furthermore, the online active role of the okhti associated with the changes on the Global Jihad Front<sup>2</sup> is transforming women's independency on social and religious level. However, the most important factor in this transformation has been the interference of modern Islamic academics as well as the online Sheikhs who are enhancing the role of women in the Jihadist fight issuing fatwas (legal opinions) ruling in favour of the okhti right to participate in the Jihad fight.

Online sites offer Muslim women knowledge, information and a space to share, to question and to debate Islamic living and practices while at the same time being able to manage the privacy of their online activities and interactions. Fruit of these online performances and fruit of the equal right of online intervention, Muslim women are also able to reclaim an active and egalitarian role for themselves.

“O mankind! Be dutiful to your Lord, Who created you from a single person (Adam), and from him (Adam) He created His wife [Hawwa (Eve)], and from them both He created many men and women and fear Allah through whom you demand your mutual (rights), and (do not cut the relations of) the wombs (kinship). Surely, Allah is Ever an All-Watcher over you<sup>3</sup>.”

However, the most important change on gender Jihad was brought up by the Syrian war to the global Jihad Front. In fact, a new perspective on women's agency is being transformed online and challenging what was once a strict male performance.

Anthropologist and author of ‘The Politics of Piety’, Saba Mahmood (2004, p.8) defines agency as:

“(…) the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective).”

David Cook (2005, p.84) in his article, ‘Women fighting in Jihad?’ addresses the legal circumstances of the feminine participation in Jihad (here understood as fight) since the pre-modern times to today, underlining the conservative character of Muslim ruling. Cook also raises gender issues related with women engaging Jihad, namely their sex purity and the definition of their martyrdom' reward. To my informants, the idea of being received with glory in the highest level of Paradise (‘Firdaws’) is the ultimate reward a Muslim woman may aspire to achieve in the afterlife: “We walk together, hold fast to the Qur'an and the Sunna and the victory will be ours. A greater reward will be given to us by our God.”

---

2 The Jihadist recruitment to Syria is the highest ever seen in recent history and Spain has a considerable number of Jihadists joining it.

3 Surah Al-Nisan [4:1].

For these reasons, the present study will focus on the following research questions:

- How women understand and define Jihad?
- How they live and enact Jihad on Facebook as a virtual sisterhood?
- How do they transfer this Jihadist role from online to offline reality?

Earlier this year I opened up a Facebook account to enter in contact with the cyber Jihad feminine sphere in Spain. I began by browsing through public Facebook pages of Muslim Spanish women, stopping to better observe the ones that had Jihadist related posts, comments, videos, Islamic music (anasheed), images or photos, mention to Dawah<sup>4</sup> and to i-Imams<sup>5</sup> (Imams who use the Internet for Islamic knowledge dissemination and argumentation, for example, issuing fatwa, giving conferences or courses). The i-Imam (as a virtual Islamic authority) and the i-Khutba (as a virtual Islamic narrative) are essential parts of the online radicalization and recruitment processes of individuals who in the ultimate phase will transfer their online knowledge and performance into an offline action in order to participate in current hot spots Jihadist scenarios like Syria or Iraq. What follows next is the result of my online fieldwork based on Facebook.

## 2 Method

A new Facebook account associated with the university email account was created and maintained strictly to manage the contacts that serve the purpose of this study. My name, academic affiliation, professional web link and provenience were made public on my Facebook profile. In some cases, the informants demanded more personal data to confirm my identity and the aim of the research.

The study started in February 2014 (data of the creation of the Facebook account) with me sending ‘friendship requests’ to Facebook accounts owners that had an open, public content<sup>6</sup>. The open, public content facilitates the task of profile’s selection as one can directly observe the contents, images, videos or comments and determine if they fulfil the Jihadist criteria employed for the purpose of this study.

---

4 Dawah simply understood as the preaching and proselytism of Islam, as a call towards Allah is the task of the men mentioned by the Qu’ran (Sura An-Nahl, The Bee, 16:125): “Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and fair exhortation, and reason with them in the better way.”

5 My informants follow online Imams, sheiks and Islamic religious scholars who are considered to belong to the general Salafist current.

6 My network of Facebook contacts was also enlarged when “friends of friends” invited me to be part of their own network. The same selection criteria (language, gender, location, Jihadist contents) was applied here and extended to the Facebook groups.

By Jihadist contents I have taken in consideration the presence of one or more of the following elements:

1. Propaganda, visual symbols and imagery (flag banners, weaponry, black horses, violence) including or promoting the female Muslim presence
2. Al-Qaeda, Isis, Caliphate references
3. Shahid's (martyr's) photos/videos/comments
4. Graphic, violent photos/videos of victims (explicitly of children) of war/conflict
5. Citations of Islamic religious sources about Jihad, battles and/or of violence
6. Salafi-Jihadist ideological orientation and features (narrative, fatwa, scholars)

All contents were filtered according to their relevance to the theme, high number of received comments or likes.

To evaluate the Jihadist contents into depth, all the collected information was crossed with semi-structured interviews. The interviews took place via private messaging on Facebook and continue to evolve until now. The interviews were structure and equal to all the informants. As the dialogue went further in time, open questions were used in order to retrieve more data. Photos, links or comments were questioned to assess the religious knowledge, intention and perception of the Jihadist message.

In the first message, as I have mentioned above, I gave a short self-presentation and I introduced them to the goals of my Facebook account. Furthermore, I requested all my informants their permission to use all contents published, shared, posted or commented by them on Facebook. All the data employed in this study is therefore legitimized by the written acceptance of the informants.

Considering the gender scope of this study, only Facebook accounts belonging to women were taken in consideration. In many cases, the informants place in between brackets the warning that they do not accept men ('no acepto hombres') and all informants were requested to confirm their gender, via private message. Although criticism may be raised concerning the easiness that one may fake their identity and gender online, it is a fact that the group of women that participate in this study are very vigilant about tracing and exposing the male presence.

I have attributed fake names (randomly chosen) to all my informants in order to protect their identities even though the informants themselves already use forged names<sup>7</sup> on their Facebook accounts. They choose war names ('Kunyas') as forged names are frequently based on terminology

---

7 Some of the informants as the interviews progressed into a more informal talk eventually shared their true name. In the case of the reverted Muslim women they shared their pre-reversion name as well.

belonging to their Salafi-Jihadist belief. Kunyas are a common Arabic tradition, serving in the past as a parental connection to the name of the first-born child (Abu for the father, Umm for the mother, for instance Abu Karim, father of Karim). The tradition evolved when the head of the Palestinian organization Al-Fatah, Yasser Arafat (Abu Ammar) decided to attribute to himself a kunya as a way to symbolize his fighter status. Although the names of the informants will not be revealed I have observed that as my informants go deeper in their process of radicalization they change their kunyas to reflect even more their full adherence to the Salafi-Jihadist ideology.

The article takes in consideration Spanish, Arabic and English publications/comments, photos and videos on Facebook in order to represent the e-Jihadist women environment in Spain. Technology advances, the living in the Web 2.0 era have transformed the use of language into a more flexible and more informal linguistic structure. Nevertheless, the knowledge of Arabic does confer more status to the believer thus investing the individual with a higher social hierarchical value. As Jan Blommaert (2005, p.71) writes:

“differences in the use of language are quickly, and quite systematically, translated into inequalities between speakers.”

In the present study, Spanish is the dominant language of the group of informants, followed by Arabic transliteration that is employed for religious expressions (‘Assalam aleikum’, ‘MaschAllah’, ‘InschAllah’) and English in very few cases. Some of the informants would during the interviews ask me the meaning of some Arabic words and only a minority of the informants proved to know how to write them in Arabic. Given this fact, I asked my informants if knowing Arabic was not a pre-condition to be a good Muslim. My informants agreed that mastering Arabic was recommended but not a determinant condition to assess the religious quality of a Muslim.

On that matter, a post about ‘Tawhid’ (doctrine of Oneness) in a Facebook group dedicated to the study of the ‘Tafsir’ (exegesis) created a long thread of discussion among the participants. A participant affirms that the ‘Tasfir’ can only be understood and explained in Arabic while others, namely one of my informants (converted Muslim woman in the process of learning Arabic herself) defended that behaving and living as a true Muslim is even more important than mastering the Arabic language. She went even further arguing:

“It is true that to increase the knowledge and to conserve the purity of the science of Allah subhana wa taala you have to make an effort to learn Arabic. However, these days the converted to Islam with different languages than the Arabic are the ones applying more the *alwalaa wal baraa*, that purify the tawhid in their daily day, more than the ones who were born amongst Muslims (...).”

The discussion was then transferred from the classic scholars Sheykh al-Islam Taqi Al-Deen Ibn Taymiya (f.728H) and Al Bukhari to the famous converted German Muslim, Pierre Vogel as legitimate religious authorities on ‘Tawhid’ because they are fluent in Arabic. The counter argument takes an interesting twist when an informant interrogates the other participants about the validity of the ‘shahada’ (the testimony) and of the ‘shahid’ (martyrdom) of those who intervene in the fight ‘fisabilillah’ (in the way of Allah) in Syria but are not fluent in Arabic. The moderator of the group ends the discussion by declaring that it is preferable to know the ‘Tawhid’ than the Arabic language.

It is very interesting to notice in this event that the both the religious comments and scholars mentioned by the woman are an integral part of the Salafi-Jihadist doctrine.

### **3 Salafi-Jihadism, the online single narrative**

“As salaamu'alaykum. I'm Bird of Jannah, another random muhajirah from the blessed land of Khilafah.”

Conceptually, the guidelines of this study are the terms Salafi-Jihadist (religious framework) and Jihadism (ideological framework), as developed under the scope of the Global Jihad Front. According to Peter Nesser (2011, p.174), the invasion of Iraq and the consolidation of Al-Qaeda as the transnational ideological Jihadist leader mark the beginning of the Global Jihad Front, at the same time validating it as the ideological homogenization of the Jihadist narrative. Jihadism in the optic of Jarret Brachman (2009, p.5), is a neologism, a non-Islamic term referring to the violent nature of Jihad as preached and practiced by Al-Qaeda. However the analysis of Jihadism has a religious aspect as well which is anchored in the doctrine of Salafism.

The ideological program of Salafism entails the purification of Islam, a return to the principles of the Companions of the Prophet and the dissemination of the faith (dawah). The dawah is in fact as transnational in its goals as the Global Jihad Front ideology and thus promotes the contact and the collaboration between extremists Islamic groups wherever they might be physically located in the offline world. In what concerns the practice of dawah in the West, Salafists promoted the idea that Muslims should refuse to integrate in the Western society and refuse to adopt its impure lifestyle. The Islamic disagreement about the return to the path of purity and the refusal of innovations was responsible for the division (‘fitna’) that came about in the Islamic world affirms Quintan Wiktorowicz (2001, 19). The author also points out (2006, 207-239), that in the vision of the Salafists the acceptance of the concept of the unity of God (‘tawhid’), the obedience to the

Qur'an and the Sunna, and the common refusal of any human subjective intervention are the unique authenticators of the Islamic creed.

Another division was brought up to the Salafist ideology by the vindication of the exercise of violence. Fawaz Gerges (2005, 138) indicates that Salafi-Jihadists, similar to their secular enemies, also hold contending visions on how to engage in the war against apostates. Therefore, Salafi-Jihadism is a subdivision of Salafism that defends the ritualization of violence under the name of Jihad. Nevertheless it needs to be underlined that even among Salafi-Jihadist thinkers the conceptualization and employment of violence differs between authors.

In the interest of the present study it was also important to evaluate the knowledge of my informants about Salafism. When questioned about their knowledge about specific terms expressions linked to the Salafist vocabulary: 'tawhid' (the oneness of God), 'tarbiyya' (religious education), 'taghut' (to cross the limits) or 'al-wala wa'l-bara'a' (loyalty and disownment for the sake of Allah) my informants presented the exact same answers with the exact same sacred texts references, proving that the online theological narrative is being consequent, coherent and effective over these women, in other words, we have here the 'single narrative' as defined by Alex Schmidt:

"Al Qaeda's ideology is expressed in its "single narrative", a unifying framework of explanations that provides its followers with an emotionally satisfying portrayal of the world in which they live and their role in it, offering them a sense of identity and giving meaning to their lives."

On the other side the present study also focus on how my Facebook informants learn, embrace and then promote online the violent concept of Jihad. Theologically the debate around the interpretation of Jihad is filled with complexity and diversity even within the Salafi-Jihadist group. By adding the justification to the participation of women in Jihad a new moral dilemma was posed with it.

Laiba, my informant is married and has children, her Facebook page is a display of Jihadist women in real action, weaponry and advices on how to have a happy marriage. As Heidi Campbell (2011,p.22) states:

"It helps explain the ways in which networked society creates new borderlands of interactions between the online and offline worlds, between the digital and embodied."

'How do you define Jihad?' She answered me back with another question: 'Do you know that when a woman gives birth that is Jihad?'

Childbirth as a category of Jihad was the first definition that some women presented to me. This is an absolute feminine view of the subject that includes by nature force, fight and blood.



Personal situations also due affect the choice and the manner that Muslim women decide to illustrate their online Jihadist performance, for instance, the converted Muslim women are more diligent and eager to prove their Salafi-Jihadist devotion: ‘To prove that I can be as good, or even better than a born Muslim’, ‘to make clear that I am a ferocious believer’ are some of the reasons advanced by the informants to post the most graphic photos or the most violent videos. As a matter of fact, the participants compete among themselves to see who has the most relevant posts or the most committed comments to the Jihadist cause. Actual photos of a woman dressed in a ‘burka’ and waving a sword was what first captured my attention to one of the Facebook pages. The informant shows much devotion and spends even more time in what comes to represent Jihad online, therefore my question to her was:

‘What are your thoughts on e-Jihad?’

‘I am fighting for life and liberty. I am fighting to show that women and men are the same. That is why I want to post photos of war where you can see women fighting, or of shahidah.’

The images receive comments such as ‘mashallah’, ‘okhti’, or ‘insch’Allah okhti’, ‘amin okhti’ or the saying of the ‘takbir’ (Allahu Akbar). Even men comment these images with: ‘I wish you the best okhti. You are a noble wife.’

What is interesting to highlight here is that we are observing the Salafi-Jihadist online narrative being assimilated by the first time and being automatically applied into their online ritualization of Jihad.

#### **4 Online Ritualization of Jihad, a female perspective**

‘If you cannot start with “Bismillah” when opening Facebook, know that this means that you should not be in fb [Facebook], since your intentions are going to be mean and that is what we are going to be judged by. our. acts and intentions [sic]. ‘

Cyberspace is a special structure offering a place for interconnections and interactivity between its users at all time. In the words of Christiane Brosius and Karin Polit (2011, 272):

“As a consequence, the fabric of media spaces constituting social space and geophysical space through rituals challenges our concepts of “virtuality” and “reality”, space and place. “

Jocelyne Cesari (2005, p.111) makes here an important spatial distinction between Islam on the Internet or the dissemination of Islamic information and Islam of the Internet understood as a sphere allowing the existence of particular religious activities or narratives that otherwise would not be available. Gary Bunt (2009, p.22) following the same line of thoughts highlights the distinct features of Islamic Internet spaces in the process of the online development of Islamic ritual and Islamic networks.

As Islamic rituals contexts and Islamic spaces change so do the studies of Islamic rituals. In fact, ritual practices associated with ‘technologically advanced societies’ maybe better referred to as ritualization according with Catherine Bell (1992, p.89). To the American religious study scholar, the attention should be on ritualization (1992, p.7):

‘(...) as a strategic way of acting and then turn to explore how and why this way of acting differentiates itself from other practices.’

From now on the definition above presented will be applied to the online ritualization of Jihad, that is to analyzing it as a practice that it is different from other Muslim practices. By doing so, the analyses will focus on performance, interaction, agents, message (textual and/or visual), all intervenient categories in the design of the social and religious online ritual strategy.

### **What is the aim of the online ritualization of Jihad?**

First, it is necessary to address the fact that Jihad is not per se an Islamic ritual although it is treated as so by many Islamic scholars who insist in including it as one of the fundamental pillars of Islam. Indeed it is a ritualistic innovation that allows its agents to establish, structure and control all activities that occur in cyberspace in the name of Jihad. Bell describes it as a “process of formalization and ritualization” (1992, p.148) that makes the invention of traditions possible.

Second, it is also necessary to address the body is an integral part of the Islamic ritual performance and the essence of the process of construction of an Islamic identity. The prayer (‘salat’) is embed in physical acts, from the rituals of purity (‘tayammum, wudu, ghusl’) to the mandatory movements (standing, bowing, prostration, sitting).

### **How can this ritual be performed online in the absence of a physical presence?**

Online the physical repetition of a body movement, an integral part of any ritual activity is not possible in the classic frames of ritual studies. Nevertheless, participating in online activities requires physical actions: turning on an electronic device, writing a password, or moving the mouse into the ‘like’ button. People do engage in this set of actions, in a repetitive, sequential way by which they enter a space (in many ways perceived as sacred) attributing to these activities a symbolic meaning.

In the interest of transferring this framework to the ritualization of Jihad the attention is pointed to all online activities expressing this complex Islamic concept. And they are plenty of activities, from videos, to photos or simple mentions to the sacred Muslim texts.

In what concerns the Spanish legal framework of online jihadist activities, the Spanish Supreme Court considers them a crime of terrorism, as equal as engaging on physical and direct terrorists acts. An example is the arrest in 2013, of a young man during the police investigation (operation Kafka), accused of inciting Jihadist actions via Facebook through compliments praising Al-qaeda's ideology and motivating other Facebook users to conduct suicide operations in the name of Jihad<sup>8</sup>.

Hence violence and ritualization of violence are categories pertaining to the analysis of online ritualization of Jihad. Pierre Bourdieu (1977, p. 107) asserts that the

“ritualization of violence in fighting is doubtless one of the most typical manifestations of the dialectic of strategy and ritual (...).”

To the development of online ritualization more important than the discipline of the body is the discipline of the mind. The cognitive activities concerning online sharing and/or production of religious knowledge are the emanation of virtual power. Akil Awan (2011, pp.16-19), associates the acceptance and legitimation of the violent online Jihadist message as a practice of cognitive dissonance involving mental acts like framing (‘promote a particular moral evaluation’), priming (‘preferential selection of news stories’) and issuing takfir (‘delegitimizing their opponents and sanctioning the shedding of Muslim blood’).

Boyer and Lienard (2005, p.3) argue that ritualization is the product of the conjugation of ‘two specialized cognitive systems’. The first being the motivational system and the second the separation of action into ‘meaningful units’ both grounded in a ‘precautionary system’, that is induced by strangers and that pressures, threats, or socially offends the individual.

In the case of Muslim individuals and moreover in the case of Spanish Muslim women it is the way that the offline world pressures, threats, and socially offends them (due to their specific religious dressing code they became easily identified targets) that induces the emotional transfer into the online sphere. During my offline fieldwork in Catalonia, I collected a considerable amount of data by interviewing Muslim women and by observing their daily life. The common feeling among the Spanish Muslim women can be summed up to the answer that I received from a young woman:

---

8 <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2013/04/11/barcelona/1365680412.html>.

‘People stop me in the street to tell me to take my scarf, to insult me, why don’t they focus instead in the young people at the park using drugs? At the airport and at other police controlled spaces I feel the pressure of being a Muslim.’

Last, when analyzing the practice of ritualization Bell claims that ritualization can promote social solidarity (1992, p.216) and we can find examples being disseminated on Facebook over and over, from relationship advices to exchanging iftar<sup>9</sup> recipes, passing to pragmatic indications on how to arrive in Syria, the sisterhood bond is tangible even online.

The bonding among the participants, is a feature that Bell views as the result of ritualization (1992, p. 193):

“Such stringent ritualization has the powerful effect of tightly binding one to a small community of like-minded people. Indeed, one of the salient features of extreme ritualization appears to be a high-profile identity as a tight-knit group of true followers, a position that heightens the contrast and ill fit with other groups.”

## 5 From virtual sisterhood to sisters in arms in Shams<sup>10</sup>

Belonging, Community and Identity are therefore three social products resulting of the process of ritualization. In fact and in the words of Brosius and Politi (2011, 269):

“(…) ritual is the practice proving that a sense of belonging can become a social fact through practising ritualised actions.”

Belonging and its correlation to the establishment of group membership is also an operative concept for Douglas Marshall (2002, p.2). Indeed, online users may be seen as social units who through their networks efforts and transition processes constitute their own virtual communities. The period of transition between being a part of an offline community into becoming a part of the online sisterhood is that of a ‘liminal state’ as Victor Turner (2007) described it, a time of transition, a time when the emotional bond will produced the necessary acceptance of new messages and beliefs.

---

9 Ramadan dinner.

10 Historical Arabic denomination to the region of the Great Syria.

As Hans Ulrich Sanner (2011, 116) states:

‘The liminal, “betwixt and between” phase of rituals is an ideal medium for the symbolic communication of sacred truths about the composition of society and cosmos.’

To Brosius and Polit (2011, 268) we have to also underline the value of the transfer of rituals, especially in periods of social crises, wars (as the one in Syria):

“Further, rituals, the transfer of rituals, as well as the transformation of rituals, often play crucial roles at times of conflict, insecurity, or dramatic change in communities and societies, to the extent that even new communities and public or private spheres emerge.”

In terms of affective sense of belonging the okhtis are very keen on making the new users feel comfortable and above all to feel that they belong to the sisterhood. Elke Mader (2011, 473) reflects on the affective perspective of ‘communitas’:

“Furthermore, communitas (...) was emerging, and was expressed in intense communication, empathy, and cooperation in emotional, as well as organisational, matters. “

The three features mentioned above about communitas (communication, empathy and cooperation) are visible for instance, when the virtual sisters choose a similar (sometimes even the same) profile photo on Facebook. Another evidence is that they share their contacts through Whatsapp (an Internet messaging tool). Their personal level of involvement constructed online is visible on their private remarks about their personal problems which they share with detailed information.

Identity is also ‘an emotional commitment through which people experience their autobiographical selves’ says Gabriel Marranci (2006, p.7). They seek advice, opinion (frequently accompanied by quotations of the sacred texts) or just comfort from one another:

“my dear beloved sister X, m [sic] I m so worried abt [sic] you all the time..dont know frm [sic] where that sort of love comes form. everytime I get yr [sic] post I get relieved that ur [sic] there safe Alhamdullilah. Plz [sic] take my love, lots of duas for u[sic].”

On one side the online connections and interactions further down the ‘togetherness’ of the virtual sisterhood. On the other side it produces an impact on their offline emotional structure.

Don Radlauer (2007, p.74) co-founder of the Institute for the Study of Asymmetric Conflict comments about the continuity between virtual community and offline existence as so:

“By providing a sense of “otherness” from ordinary society, extremist virtual communities can also deepen their members’ alienation from their surroundings, reducing their normal inhibitions against violence while increasing their ability to perform as ‘sleepers’.”

Aisha is a young Muslim woman who enjoys her sweets with almond and honey and the sunny days in Spain. She has finished high school and she daydreams about her future partner. Her time is filled with her Facebook page, posting romantic photos the ideal future husband. He is a good-looking Muslim, strong and with loving eyes. He is dressed as a Jihadist, carries a gun and on his forehead he has the green banner of the ‘shahid’. Behind him, a young Muslim woman, dressed in a floating black ‘abaya’ and ‘hijab’ raises her hands to pray. Aisha wants to be that okhti in the image, better even, Aisha is willing to be another okhti, the one that is a true fighter and she posts a new photo. This time the okhti stands in front, wearing total black while waving a modified assault weapon with one arm and holding a child in the other. I asked her:

“Would you participate in a Jihadist fight?”

“I am very much willing to, thanks and praises to God.”

And she keeps on searching online for fatwas on Jihadist women, for Hadiths and comments on the Qur’an that justify her favourite subject: ‘Jihad fisabilillah’ (Jihad for the cause of Allah).

“I use the Internet all the time to search and to share information about Tawhid<sup>11</sup>, Dawah or to watch what is going on in Syria and Palestine. I also use it to connect myself with the other sisters. We help each other to become better Muslim women. We all seek a deeper understanding of Islam and on how to engage on Jihad and it is more comfortable to do it among okhti.”

A common trait to my informant’s online interactions is humour, for instance one of the informants posted a photo of a 9mm weapon with the comment:

“Did you always question what is inside of a woman’s purse? Well, a 9mm thus...”

to what the other okhtis reply to with comments such as:

‘Thought you would get one in pink’, ‘I have to get one myself.’

---

11 Tawhid means Allah is One and Unique.

Exchanges similar to this one are frequent and since some of the okhtis started to arrive in Syria, they have evolved from posting pictures of children crying along side their dead parents body to inquire about practical information on: “How do I get to Raqqa<sup>12</sup>, ‘Do you get enough to eat there?’, ‘How can I book a hotel?’ , ‘What is the best itinerary?’ or ‘Do you have Internet connection?’ are part of the questions that the okhtis that already performed the ‘hijra’<sup>13</sup> (migration to Jihadist war scenarios) are confronted online by the other okhtis.

In the opinion of one okhti, the ‘hijra’ to Shams:

“(…) was in adherence to the path of Ibrāhīm (sallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam) who established for them the tradition of declaring enmity and hatred towards the mushrikīn<sup>14</sup> and their tawāghīt<sup>15</sup>.”

Salafi-Jihadists followers defend that the founding principle of ‘millat Ibrahim’ (religion of Abraham) is the concept of ‘al-wala’ wal bara’ (loyalty and renunciation) in the terms defined by the Jordanian scholar (accredited as one of the most important Jihadist thinkers) Al-Maqdisi<sup>16</sup> (1959-). Hence, the Salafi-Jihadists justify the displacement (hijra) of men and women to the region as a part of their individual duty to Jihad (‘Jihad al-fard’ayn’). Online sheiks have been dedicating their time on issuing fatwa about the subject. Several of them agree with the role of women in Jihad being confined to motherhood, praying, domestic activities and to the moral support of their husbands. In fact, many of the women think that Jihadist contents should also be enlarged to the ones reflecting their role as a mother and as a wife. The mother’s support and educator role is therefore understood as a way of doing Jihad and posting it online is a way of promoting and teaching other ohkti about it.

Others expand these activities to the performance of online dawa<sup>17</sup>. ‘How do you perform Dawah online?’ I questioned her after seeing she had a post with the title ‘The role of the Muslim women in the Dawah’. By it Salma gave instructions to her okhtis on how to be and to behave as a good Muslim wife, and how to support their husbands in their call for Jihad fisabilillah. The obligation of the women is to follow the example of model Muslim women (like Khadija, Umm Salama or Umm Imarah) and online they can do it by posting photos with instructions on how to wear the hijab or the niqah but also by posting pictures of Jihadist male fighters.

---

12 North-Centre of Syria.

13 Name given in Arabic to the migration of the Prophet Mohammed from Mecca to Medina.

14 Polytheists.

15 Disbelievers.

16 To better understand the written work of Al-Maqdisi I recommend the book of Joas Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi*, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

17 On this matter, it is interesting to notice that the virtual sisterhood is well alert of the online privacy sets and correspondent dangers: “Assalamu Alaikum Warahmatullah Wabarkatuh[sic]. ... my sister in Islam, u [sic] should maintain some strategy, u [sic] r [sic] doing dawah, good, but do not share personal matters, be careful of ur [sic] safety, may ALLAH protect u [sic] from all evil and devil ... ameen FI AMANILLAH ...”

Sheik Yusuf al Qaradawi<sup>18</sup>, the Egyptian Islamic theologian issued a fatwa where he justifies woman participation in Jihad as part of their individual Islamic duties in order to fight the occupation of Muslim land:

“(...) I believe a woman can participate in this form of Jihad according to her own means and condition. Also, the organizers of these martyr operations can benefit from some, believing women as they may do, in some cases, what is impossible for men to do.”

Still, during my Facebook research on the online diaries of Jihadist women living in Syria (or Iraq) I did not find one narrative accounting their direct intervention in a battle, or even that they receive any weaponry training, as an example of it one informant posted a photo of her 9mm gun saying:

‘Been six months here, still I don't know how to use kalash [sic].I only know how to use 9mm calibre.’

‘The stories of Muslim women who are now fighters of Allah’, or ‘Feminine Fighters of Allah’ are the titles of Facebook photo albums seeking online support or recruitment for the fight in Syria. Syria, Mali, Somalia and Palestine are the main Jihadist fight scenarios that appear in these albums. In it diverse war/violent photos of women that are now living in Syria with the description of their story are displayed and commented by the okhti.

However, these albums revealed three striking features: they were created by male individuals, the male individuals are the one's inciting and praising women's participation in Jihadist conflicts and finally, and third, they justify their posts and photos with Suras and/or hadiths such as Sura Al Nisa 4:74:

“Those who readily fight in the cause of God are those who forsake this world in favour of the Hereafter. Whoever fights in the cause of God, then gets killed, or attains victory, we will surely grant him a great recompense.”

## 6 Conclusion

‘Okhti online’ is a virtual sisterhood aiming first to share and spread Jihadist contents, secondly to support the Jihadist conflict scenarios and thirdly to become a real life Jihadist fighter. Jihad is perceived and performed by Spanish Muslim women on Facebook under their feminine perspective,

---

18 <http://www.meforum.org/646/the-qaradawi-fatwas>.



as sisters, mothers, and wives and as women. Yet, violence is defended through photos, images and videos but also through comments and declarations. Declarations that have a clear message, these women are willing to transfer their online Jihadists performances into real war scenarios. Furthermore, the online active role of the *okhti* associated with the changes on the Global Jihad Front<sup>19</sup> is transforming women's independency on social and religious level. However, the most important factor in this transformation has been the interference of modern Islamic academics as well as the online Sheikhs who are giving legitimacy to the role of women in the Jihadist fight issuing fatwaa ruling in favour of the *okhti* right to participate in the Jihad fight. Observing Muslim women online (in this case on Facebook) demonstrates that the way they are practicing their faith online is also changing how they practice their faith offline. Moreover, that the *okhti* online radicalization process is being successful moving these Muslim women into Jihadist wives living as and with frontline fighters:

“Sister, what's the hardest thing for you there? Nothing beats the palpitation that a Mujahid's wife has whilst checking list names of the Martyrs.”

## Bibliography

Akil, A., Hoskins, A. & O'Loughlin, B., 2011. *Radicalisation & Media: Connectivity and Terrorism in the New Media*. London: Routledge.

Alex, S., 2014. ‘*Al-Qaeda's Single Narrative and Attempt to Develop Counter Narratives: The State of Knowledge*’, ICCT Research Paper.

Bell, C., 1992. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Blommaert, J., 2005. *Discourse: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu P., 1977, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Boyer, P & Liénard, P., 2006. ‘Why ritualized behavior? Precaution Systems and action parsing in developmental, pathological and cultural rituals.’ *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*. 29: 595-650.

Brachman, J., 2009. *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice*, London: Routledge.

---

19 The Jihadist recruitment to Syria is the highest ever seen in recent history and Spain has a considerable number of Jihadists joining it.

- Brosius, C. & Polit, K., 2011. 'Introducing Media Rituals and Ritual Media', in: Axel Michaels (ed.), *Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual, vol. IV: Reflexivity, Media, and Visuality, Section 1, "Reflexivity and Discourse on Ritual"*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, p. 267.
- Bunt, G., 2009. *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Campbell, H., 2012. 'Understanding the relationship between religious practice online and offline in a networked society', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. 80(1), pp. 64-93.
- Cesari, J., 2014. *When Islam and Democracy Meet: Muslims in Europe and in the United States*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Cook, D., 2005. 'Women Fighting in Jihad', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 28, pp. 375-84.
- Gerges, F., 2005. *The far enemy: why jihad went global*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mader, E., 2011. 'Stars in Your Eyes: Ritual Encounters with Shah Rukh Khan in Europe', in: Axel Michaels (ed.), *Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual, vol. IV: Reflexivity, Media, and Visuality, Section 1, "Reflexivity and Discourse on Ritual"*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, p. 463.
- Mahmood, S., 2005. *Politics of Piety, The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Marranci, G., 2006. *Jihad beyond Islam*, London & New York: Berg.
- Marshall, D. A., 2002. 'Behavior, Belonging, and Belief: A Theory of Ritual Practice.' *Sociological Theory* 20, pp. 360–380.
- Nesser, P., 2011. 'Ideologies of Jihad in Europe', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23:2, pp. 173–200.
- Radlauer, D., 2007. 'Virtual Communities As Pathways to Extremism' in: Ganor, B. & Knop V.K. & Duarte, C. (ed.). *Hypermedia seduction for terrorist recruiting* Vol. 25, No. 1, NATO Science for Peace and Security Series: Human and Societal Dynamics, Amsterdam: IOS Press.
- Sanner, H.U. 2011. 'A Message about Life: Performance and Reflexivity in Hopi Indian Ritual Clowning', in: Axel Michaels (ed.), *Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual, vol. IV: Reflexivity, Media, and Visuality, Section 1, "Reflexivity and Discourse on Ritual"*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, p.113.
- Turner, V. W., 2007. *The ritual process: structure and anti-structure*. New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction.
- Wiktorowicz, Q., 2001. 'The New Global Threat: Transnational Salafis and Jihad', *Middle East Policy*, vol. VIII, no.4, pp.18-38.
- Wiktorowicz, Q., 2006. 'Anatomy of the Salafi Movement', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 29, No. 3, pp. 207-239.

## Internet Sources

<http://quran.com>

El Mundo 2013, 'Detenido un hombre en Ulldecona por su relación con el terrorismo islamista' 11 March viewed 01 September 2014,

<<http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2013/04/11/barcelona/1365680412.html>>.

## Biography

CLAUDIA CARVALHO is a PhD student at Tilburg University, School of Humanities, analyzing the theme of religious violence in the form of Jihad, Cyber Jihad and Islamic Terrorism. In 2003 she completed summa cum laude her Master Degree in International Relations with a thesis about the Israeli-Arabic conflict that was later published as a book. Pursuing further her education she attended the Course of National Defense promoted by the Portuguese Defense Ministry in 2005. Also in this year she co-wrote a book, Islam in Europe, where she traced the profile of Islamic communities in Scandinavian countries. Since then she has been actively participating in International and national Conferences over Islam, Jihad and Terrorism, either as a key speaker or as a panelist. In June 2014 she finished an online Advanced Course on Jihadism and Terrorism in Spain promoted by CISDE (International Campus for Security and Defense). She is a project member of Euro-Islam.info ([GSRL Paris](#)/CNRS France and Harvard University), NISIS (Netherlands Interuniversity School for Islamic Studies), [Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture Studies](#) ([Evans/Glasscock Digital Humanities Project](#), at [Texas A&M University](#)), among other organizations.

Claudia Carvalho  
Tilburg School of Humanities,  
Kamer D 235  
PO Box 90153  
5000 LE Tilburg  
Netherlands

(visiting address)

# Virtual Christian Places

## Between Innovation and Tradition

Stefan Gelfgren

### Abstract

With the starting point of all Christian places (114 places) in the virtual world Second Life (SL), this article aims to study how SL is part of a negotiation process between old offline media and new online media, between established traditions and innovation. The questions addressed in this article are how such places are constructed, the constructor's intentions and how they are related to established traditions.

The idea behind this study was that the owners (studied through a questionnaire) set the agenda for what is going on at the place they own, and for how the places are constructed.

The virtual world gives almost endless possibilities to create any form of place for Christian community and celebration, and people are limited only by their imaginations, but still tradition play an important aspect of the constructions.

Concepts such as 'remediation', 'hybridity', and 'affordance' are used to interpret the places and their relation to traditions and the so called real world.

### Keywords

Christianity, church, Second Life, remediation, hybridity, affordance, digital humanities, secularisation

## 1 Introduction

It has been assumed that digital media affect religious faith and practices in new and previously unpredictable ways. Within the growing academic field of 'digital religion', this notion is gradually nuanced and made more complex than before. Although the internet in general, and social media and virtual worlds in particular, are claimed to transform our whole culture and way of living and,

---

therefore, the religious landscape, evidence shows that such far-reaching claims must be revisited. This article seeks to revise and nuance such statements.

With the starting point of Christian places in the virtual world Second Life (SL), this article aims to study how SL is part of a negotiation process between old offline media and new online media, between established traditions and innovation.

The aim is to investigate the intention behind the places as seen from the owners' point of view with a special focus on the relation between offline and online and between tradition and innovation. Questions addressed in this article are how such spaces are constructed, the constructor's intentions and how the sites are related to established traditions. The idea behind this study was that the owners set the agenda for what is going on at the place they own, and for how the places are constructed, and that this is negotiated in relation to the possibilities and constraints provided by the medium. The virtual world gives almost endless possibilities to create any form of place for Christian community and celebration, and people are limited only by their imaginations. This study differs from most studies on SL religiosity that have mainly focused on what is happening in-world and thus are focused on in-world activities and participants such as visitors, laymen, preachers, clergymen, and so forth.

Research on digital religion has been described as going through different stages throughout the years (Campbell 2013; Højsgaard & Warburg 2005). Beginning in the 1990s, research on digital religion defined online expressions as an alternative to the so-called real world – as a so-called cyberspace – with its own set of rules. In the second wave of research, scholars nuanced this assumption and began to develop an interest in mapping the diversity of online expressions. In the third wave of research, it was noted and studied how the online and the offline worlds were linked together and complemented each other. In what might be called a fourth wave of research on digital religion, it is acknowledged how the digital world has become woven into the fabric of our everyday lives and how the digital and physical are merging (Campbell 2013; Cheong, Fischer-Nielsen, Gelfgren & Ess 2012) into a single, but mixed, hybrid state (see, for example, Lindgren 2013) or a third space (Hoover & Echchaibi 2012).

In a previous study in which all Christian places (at that time 114 places) within SL were mapped and categorized (at the end of 2011), it was noticed how a majority of Christian places are designed according fairly traditional concepts throughout the Christian sphere – including Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions alike (Gelfgren & Hutchings 2014). In another related study, the hybrid nature of the Church building (both the virtual and the physical) was emphasized, and it was claimed that there is a relation between the physical and the virtual church building and how they both attempt to reach – or transcend – into the realm of the sacred (Gelfgren 2014). This article will use the study of the Christian places as a foundation to be further built upon through a questionnaire

survey and interviews with the owners of the sites. At the center of the argumentation of this article lies the relation between the virtual and the physical, between tradition and progression, and between familiarity and innovation.

SL might nowadays be considered as out-of-date given its declining media attention and user statistics. However, approximately one million users are still active, between 30,000 and 60,000 logins are made per day, and 10,000 new accounts are created every day (“Metrics,” n.d; .“Infographic: 10 Years of Second Life” 2013). Given the fact that there are other and newer virtual worlds such as World of Warcraft, Minecraft, and Eve online, as well as other games and worlds (often two dimensional) for younger Internet users such as Moviestarplanet, Panfu, and Club Penguin, and new devices such as the Oculus Rift, we have probably not seen the end of virtual worlds. As one of the largest virtual worlds, and with a significant amount of freedom for the user to create his/her own ‘universe’ in any conceivable way, SL is interesting to study when it comes to issues such as hybridity and the relation between innovation and tradition.

In times when established religious institutions are being contested and undermined due to an increasing pluralism, at least in the Western world, one might expect a degree of (market) adaptation among churches and other Christian institutions (see, for example, Martin 2010; Taylor 2007). This assumption ties in to what is happening online, and SL churches give us an opportunity to investigate this – i.e., they show us how established traditions comply with the potential of transformation and adaptation. Douglas Estes (2009) mentions in his book on how to be a church in a virtual world that “this type of church is unlike any church the world has ever seen [...] It is a completely different type of church from any the world has ever seen.” (p. 18)

Negotiating religious authority is one reoccurring theme within digital religion (see Cheong 2012, for a good introduction and overview), and similar claims are tied to the transforming potential of the internet in general. The internet is often associated with processes that have overthrown established structures such as those associated with political power – as was seen in The Arab Spring uprisings – and that have the potential to transform our personal lives and relationships and lead to new paradigms in education, journalism, and marketing. This disruptive potential of the Internet is often seen as intertwined with the media itself and as part of positive Internet rhetoric (Castells 2003; Jenkins 2006; Rheingold 2002).

Internet was created in close relation to the needs of the military in the sixties, but further developed by Californian entrepreneurs with a background in the flower power movement, hence developing the anti-hierarchical and counter cultural aspect of Internet (Rainie & Wellman 2012; Turner 2006). Its transformative power has been claimed over and over again, in relation to religious change as well (Brasher 2001; Helland 2005). The ‘many to many’ communicative character of internet (Castells 2003), its anti-hierarchical structure, and openness is claimed to be

entwined into very nature of the internet, and the disruptive nature is seen as inherent in the technology itself.

Well-known media scholars such as Marshall McLuhan (1964) and Walter Ong (1982) (and many more) have famously pointed out how the medium itself determines and formulates the message, expressed in McLuhan's famous words "the media is the message". It is, however, too simplistic to stress media alone as the main factor behind such social and political changes. It is becoming increasingly difficult to claim such monocausal explanations (see, for example, Morozov 2011). Nevertheless, these are not just rhetorical issues; the Internet has been proven to have a transformative and disruptive role, but such assertions are complex.

### 1.1 Affordance, remediation, and hybridity

How can one make use of an object or a medium such as Second Life and does the medium support or constrain certain actions? Here the relation between the object and the subject is highlighted through the concept of affordance. The use of an environment or object is related to both the object itself and to the subject's prejudices and previous understandings of the object (as influenced by, for example, Gaver 1991 and Gibson 1979, and for an overview see, for example, Örnberg Berglund 2009). Norman (1999) adds 'conventions' to the concept of affordance to highlight how it is possible for a group of users to learn and establish rules for how objects are supposed to be used – patterns that only slowly evolve over time. Thus when creating Christian places in SL people might construct them based on their previous understanding of what a Christian place or a church is.

In their influential work on remediation, Bolter and Grusin (1999) explained how new media always rely on older media forms. They wrote: "What is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media" (p. 15). This article deals with the first step of this argument – how the church is refashioned and thus remediated in a new medium such as a virtual world. In the same way as new media relies on old media, digital religious expressions rely on physical expressions of religious faith and practices.

The virtual churches are also seen as hybrid spaces where the virtual world is intertwined with the physical world (Gelfgren 2014). Lindgren, Dahlberg-Grundberg, and Johansson (2014) write about hybridity as the representation of "the coming together of online and offline, media and matter, or, more dynamically, as the interplay between the online and offline dimension. But, more specifically, it could also be viewed in terms of interaction between old and new media" (p. 2). The intersection between old and new media is of particular interest in this article.

The hypothesis of this article is that virtual churches and Christian places are constructed in ways that are related to, and rooted in, perceived concepts and understandings of what ‘ordinary’ and so-called real life churches and Christian places are. The assumption that virtual churches and places are something qualitatively new is, therefore, contested. The novelty of virtual worlds does not necessarily mean that something completely new is created, instead there is a hybrid mix of old and new media, a blend of tradition and innovation, and an act of balancing the familiar and the imaginable.

## 1.2 Empirical material

During late 2011 and early 2012, Gelfgren and Hutchings conducted a study (2014) and located 114 different Christian places in SL through the in-world search function by searching for terms such as ‘Christian’, ‘church’, ‘chapel’, and the like.<sup>1</sup> Christian groups were also searched for with references to places. The search terms were English, but Swedish, German, Egyptian, and places of other origin were found.

In the current work, the 2014 study has been complemented and nuanced by a questionnaire sent out to the owners of the different Christian places. Questions focused the owners, their engagement with SL, how they view tradition in relation to SL, and how the places are constructed. Information about the owner was found under ‘place profile’ and ‘about land’ in the SL browser. The answer frequency was approximately 50% of the assigned owners of the Christian places. One owner can own different places, and in this case six owners owned two places each. The owners were contacted individually three times asking them to fill in the online survey that was made with the Survey Monkey tool (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>). The survey mixed multiple-choice questions (most of them with the possibility to add comments) with a few additional open-ended questions. In addition, five in-depth interviews were conducted, including three via Skype, one through in-world chatting, and one respondent who preferred answering a set of written questions. In this article, the interviewees are referred to by their SL avatar’s name. The interviews are first and foremost used to deepen and balance the answers from the online questionnaire.

---

1 A quick search with the in-world search function (29/04/14) for places related to ‘church’ now generates 314 hits, and ‘Christian’ generates 114 hits, which can be compared to 3 hits for ‘mosque’ and 11 for ‘Muslim’ and 5 hits for ‘synagogue’ and 13 for ‘Jewish’. This can be compared, for example, with 566 hits for ‘university’, 205 for ‘museum’, 1609 for ‘party’, 569 for ‘erotic’, and 3172 for ‘sex’. Christian places and churches are thus a noticeable part of the SL community and are probably the largest among the established religious traditions.



## 2 Second Life and the Christian places

SL was launched in 2003 by the California-based company Linden Labs. It is free to download the needed software (the SL browser) and to become a member (a resident) of the community. In-world, it is possible to rent land (islands or parts of islands), and this makes it possible to sculpt the landscape into whatever shape one might want, or to build any form of constructions such as churches, parks, cemeteries, night clubs, museums, whole villages, etc. Residents are represented by avatars that can be in almost any form one might wish, although humanoid characters are the most common. It is possible to create and sell virtual goods with so-called Linden dollars, a currency connected to the US dollar that can be transferred in and out of the SL world.

SL is not really a game in the sense that it has a purpose of winning or completing missions, and it is instead more a digital mirror of the physical world we live in. People, the residents, ‘live’ their lives in SL; they socialize, build relations, attend different social events, and much more (for an introduction, see Boellstorff 2008). Visitors can, in terms of religious participation, join Buddhist meditation (Grieve 2010), pray in a mosque (Derrickson 2008), visit synagogues (Cohen 2012), attend neopagan ceremonies (Radde-Antweiler 2007), and more.

### 2.1 Christian places in Second Life

The majority of Christian places are associated with the Protestant branch of the Church (including denominational, non-denominational, and former state churches), but there is a considerable number of Catholic places and to a lesser degree also Orthodox places. Approximately two thirds of the places have a representational church building on it, i.e., a church that is clearly recognizable as a church with a familiar interior design and architectural style that often includes pews, stained glass, an altar, and an ambo. In addition, many places also have spaces for contemplation, recreation, or amusement, and these are areas and functions that extend the traditional use of a Christian place.

The study by Gelfgren and Hutchings (2014) aimed to get an overview of the visual look of all the places. The authors categorized the churches in five different styles, including ‘ornamental churches’, ‘Protestant reproduction churches’, ‘Roman Catholic and Orthodox reproduction churches’, churches with a ‘fantasy architecture’, and a fifth category with ‘non-church architectural style’. ‘Ornamental churches’ are churches built without being intended for Christian worship. Instead they can be a part of an authentic village, a copy of a famous church meant to be a tourist attraction, or a building for wedding ceremonies. ‘Reproduction churches’ are buildings with a religious purpose modeled after traditional churches. ‘Fantasy churches’ have a more imaginative

construct, and the ‘non-church’ category includes buildings without having any function as a active church.



*Fig. 1: The Koelner Dom*

For example, the Koelner Dom (Cologne Cathedral) is a replica of the real dome in Cologne and is used as a tourist attraction, and Second Norway has a replica of a traditional Norwegian stave church that can be rented for ceremonies like weddings and other parties. A place such as Basset Hills Fellowship Church looks like a reconstruction of a modern Protestant American church with a small bell tower on top of the roof, pews, stained glass, and a stage with an ambo as well as dressing rooms and a room for babysitting. Outside there are parking lots that even have spaces for disabled people. This place represents what one would expect from a real world church.



*Fig. 2: Basset Hills Fellowship Church*

The St George Orthodox Christian Church is an Orthodox Church also built like a reproduction of a real church with icons, an iconostasis, an altar, and pose balls for praying and bowing before the Lord. In these two cases there is no doubt that a visitor is facing a church. On the other hand, we found churches such as The Church of the Dawntreader with an open structure, without walls, but with a pulpit and two rows of pews arranged in a semi-circular shape. The ‘church’ is covered with a cupola with huge brass bells, and it is situated next to the shore with crashing waves. Close to the church we find a dance floor, trees, a labyrinth, and more. At His Love we find a grassy and hilly landscape with trees, a Calvary scene, and a waterfall accompanied by several spots for contemplation.



*Fig. 3: St George Orthodox Christian Church*



*Fig. 4: Church of the Dawntreader*



*Fig. 5: His Love*

Of these 114 places, 81 (71%) had a traditional church on the site that was reproduced with a clearly recognizable offline architectural style – often with a rectangular structure with walls, windows, church door, pews, altar, and ambo. In a previous case-based study, based upon the study of two churches (“The Anglican Cathedral” in Second Life, and “Church online” which is present online in SL and through a web-based interface), Hutching pointed out how virtual churches are deliberately constructed to be familiar and recognizable for the visitors. He writes that “[v]isual and liturgical familiarity can also function in this way, demonstrating the authenticity of the church to visitors who understand the appropriate codes of meaning” (2010, p. 77). Only nine places had erected a building with the function of a church but in a more imaginative architectural style. Of the 114 Christian places, no more than 15 places had buildings such as nightclubs, cafés, and

meditations spaces, but no actual church building. Nine locations used the landscape as the primary setting for religious faith and practices. Instead of a church and other buildings, the landscape was made up of hills and rivers, trees, flowers, sculptures, places with benches and campfires, and so on. Often the church building was only one part of a place and was complemented with additional areas for socializing, recreation, and amusement. Fireplaces, shops, flower gardens, majestic trees, scenic views, houses for rent, games, and so on were common features at many Christian places. At places with churches, 65% also had additional areas for socializing, 58% had areas for contemplation, and 58% had a garden. Thus there were other purposes connected to the places, and these will be dealt with below.

Of these places, 67 of the 114 (59%) could be designated as Protestant based on theological or denominational statements associated with the place and were either denominational, non-denominational, or with an unknown Protestant affiliation. Twenty-five places could be identified as Roman Catholic and five as Orthodox. It was possible to identify 17 places without a specific Christian affiliation. Thirteen of the Protestant places were designed with a specific focus on socializing and fellowship, but none of the Roman Catholic or Orthodox places were designed with a primarily social aspect in mind. Instead, Roman Catholic and Orthodox places tended to emphasize personal meditation and contemplation with only a few examples of areas for socializing. In other words, Protestants have a higher degree of presence and visibility in SL as well as a wider range of facilities ranging from amusements, to fellowship, to conducting services when compared with Roman Catholic and Orthodox places (compare with Campbell's (2010) discussion on 'religious social shaping of technology').

Given the possibility to construct places in any conceivable way in terms of imaginative architecture or mixing elements from different religious/Christian traditions, a vast majority of Christian places are at a first glance faithful to 'real world' structures and the traditions they observe. The assumed innovation and mixing of traditions and anti-hierarchical structures seems to be rather scarce.

## 2.2 The owners of the places

Why are the Christian places constructed in the way they are? There are no physical constraints in terms of building materials or gravity, and there are no particular social or traditional boundaries to consider when making these places. Still, the degree of innovation and 'rule bending' are rather low even though it is possible to see a change in these tendencies.

The Internet is claimed to have the power to challenge and overthrow established structures. It is not only the media itself that contributes to such processes, and the actors behind the media

play a significant role in such activities. For example, Heidi Campbell (2013), inspired by Jon Anderson (1999), has pointed out how new actors and religious authorities emerge online and find a platform within the religious sphere. She divides the group that she calls ‘religious digital creatives’ into three separate categories. First are the ‘creole pioneers’ who are persons skilled in technology and who can use their digital competence to gain a reputation online. Then there are the ‘reformer critics’ consisting of people who are critical toward prevalent structures and who use the Internet as a platform to reach an audience and to set an alternative agenda for the discussion. Finally there are the ‘spokesperson-activists’ who are digitally skilled persons working within established structures. In the material gathered for this study, we got an insight into their backgrounds and current situations and how they engaged in Second Life Christianity as the owners of the places.

Men made up 58% of the informants, and 65% were between 41 and 60 years old. Only 2% were between 21 and 30 years old. Among them, 82% stated that they were the owners of the place and 35% claimed the function of a ‘teacher’ (such as priest, pastor, or similar). A total of 42% of the informants also built and made constructions at the places.

In the survey, only 15% of the respondents answered “no” to the question “do you have a Christian affiliation offline?” In other words, people who are involved in owning and running the Christian places were likely to have an offline Christian affiliation, and consequently 74% of the places were related to a specific Christian tradition. When asked if the site is “related to a specific Christian tradition – how is it related to your offline-affiliation”, 80% answered that it was the same (we note, however, that 21 out of 51 respondents skipped the question, which was much higher than for other questions on the survey).

It is beyond any doubt that the large majority of the sites are run by people with a religious engagement offline and that the places are related to their offline affiliation. This might not be a surprise, but it illustrates the hybrid mix of how online engagement is complemented with offline engagement rather than being two separate entities. At the same time, 66% of the respondents answered that they did not have a similar role in an offline church. Their SL engagement thus appears to be a way to express other forms of commitment than what their traditional church provides space for.

Among the interviewed persons, we find different reasons for their SL work. One woman among the interviewees was carrying out her volunteer work online because an illness prevented her from engaging in such work in her offline church (interview with Lady Starbrook-Yosuke). Another interviewee was engaged in SL and had the function of an owner and clergyman through his capacity as a clergy to be (interview with Daniel Arbizu). The owner of Bible Island was a pastor in an offline church and his place was an extension, an outreach, of his church (interview with Helios Telling). Another of the interviewees worked in SL as part of his position as a clergyman in a

Lutheran church (interview with Markus Pexington). One site, S:t Sava, is run by a previous Christian Orthodox, but nowadays “almost an atheist”, who wants to present the Orthodox church to people outside the Orthodox faith. Thus there are various relations between offline and online in terms of personal engagement – and we found people within all three different categories according to Campbell’s categorization.

### 2.3 Why a church building?

For one question, the respondents had to mark on a scale their adherence to a few different concepts. They were chosen to be seen as contradictory pairs and included tradition–progressivity, familiarity–innovation, and faithful–ecumenical. The answers did not differ significantly, but the top three were, as seen by the owners, progressivity, innovation and ecumenism – i.e. the three concepts that are in line with a transforming form of Christianity. However, as hinted above in this article, most places still seemed to emphasize tradition and the familiar, at least in the way the places were constructed.

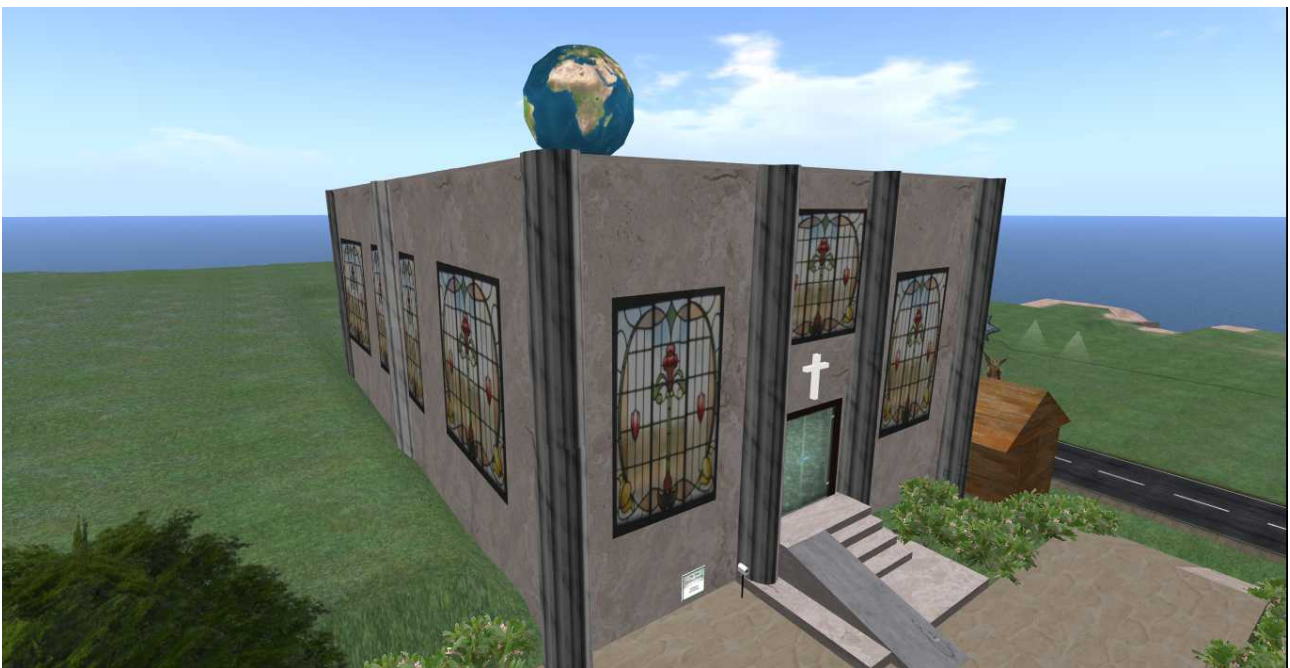
When looking upon the different places as a whole, the churches were only a part of the setting and the different places had spaces with other functions as well. Among those who answered the questionnaire, 89% had constructed a church building, and among them 98% claimed that their church building was “easily recognized as a church”. When listing different artifacts associated with a recognizable church, church-like architecture (95%), pews (80%), and an altar (74%) were the top three most common items found in the places studied here. All three features are associated with a traditional and hierarchical structure. Stained glass, candle holders, crucifixes/crosses, icons, and pulpits were other artifacts that appeared in more than 40% of the churches.

The church building has a central role at most Christian places, and the reason for putting a traditional church building in the space was, in most cases, rather obvious. The respondents basically wanted a church. They stressed how they explicitly wanted the real life church to transcend into SL – “[it is] in line with our original vision, to take RL [real life] church into SL”, according to one respondent. Familiarity and recognizability were reoccurring themes associated with the church building and were seen as important when creating these Christian environments. “It’s meant to be a church”, “it’s a church”, “so it will be easily recognizable as a church”, and “we wanted attendees to feel like they were in a real church” were some of the answers to the question regarding the reason why they built a representational church.



Grace Cuthbertsson, leader of the Vine Christian Fellowship, said:

We contemplated going with a simple, nonidentifiable building type, but instead decided on a modern structure that is not too traditional but is still recognizable as a church so that those who find the atmosphere of a building to be important in worship would sense that they are on sacred ground, and we wanted newcomers to know without a doubt that we are a Christian ministry and not a store, nightclub etc. We wanted our purpose to be evident.



*Fig. 6 The Vine Christian Fellowship*

The church building is one of the main symbols for the Church and the Christian community together with other artifacts and symbols such as the cross, the bible, and icons. While most churches looked like traditional churches, there were exceptions. For example, at Kirkkosaari they have deliberately chosen to replicate a ‘real life’ church (The Ristikiven kirkko) that looks like an adaptation to SL, with no roof, a boulder altar, and logs as pews.

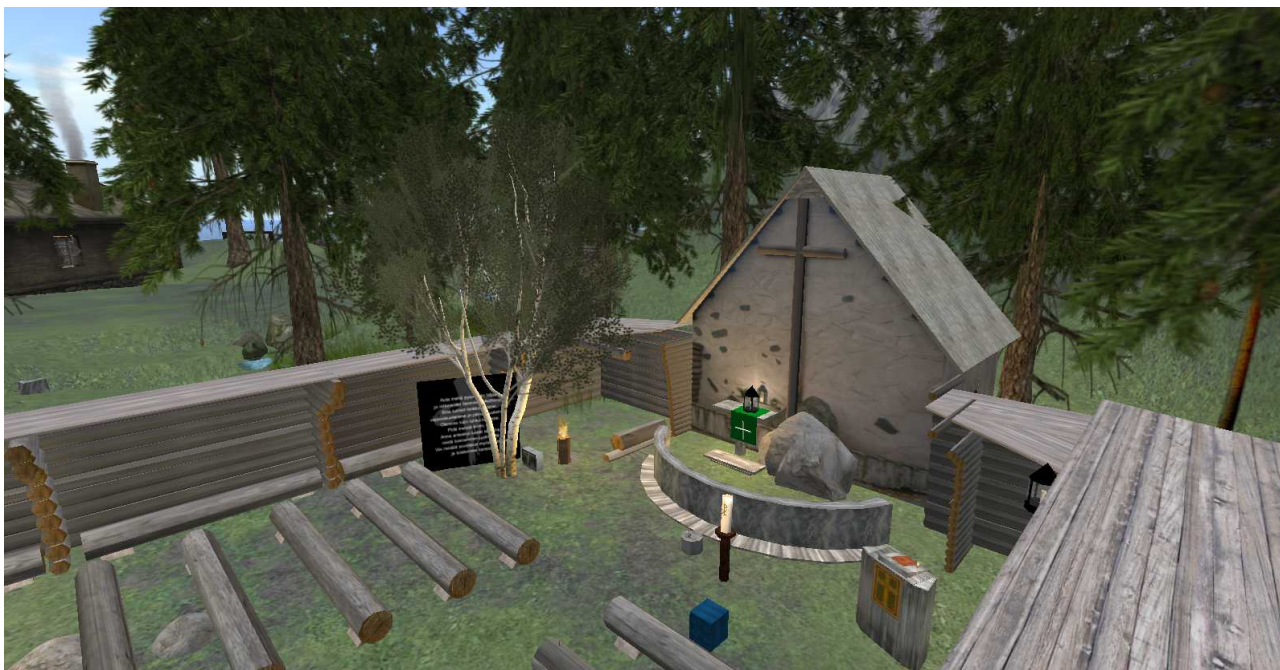


Fig. 7: Ristikiven kirkko

One can also assume how conventions, as in Norman's (1999) sense of how they are associated with affordance, limit the notion of what a church is. Even though it is possible to talk about limitations and conventions, there were often well thought through ideas behind the traditional look of the churches as will be dealt with further below.

## 2.4 Traditional churches – innovative use

Many owners of the Christian places built a traditional church, often at a central position, and they had an ambition to do something else compared to the so-called real-life churches. As mentioned, adherence to 'progressivity', 'innovation', and 'ecumenical' were regarded more highly than 'tradition', 'familiarity', and 'faithful'.

When the owners were asked about how the place was intended to be used, "individual contemplation or prayer" was pointed out as the most important activity. Forty-five (out of 51 respondents) answered this particular question, and 82% marked 'contemplation/prayer' as something they had intended for the site. 'Socializing with fellow Christians' (76%) and 'reaching out to the SL community' (73%) were the next top two reasons for building the church, and these were followed by 'worship', 'scheduled services and meetings', and 'providing information about the Christian faith'.

Even though the large amount of traditional church buildings pointed toward a structured, familiar, and recognizable form of Christian practices, the owners still tended to see their places as progressive and innovative. One must rhetorically ask how this is possible. We found however a tendency for the Christian places in SL to lean toward the spiritual and communal side of Christian tradition, and many sites (with or without churches) had additional spaces for socializing and fellowship. It is, of course, difficult to evaluate what can be considered progression and innovation under such circumstances, and such a task is beyond the scope of this work.

There were also examples of how the affordance of SL was used to visualize and make the visitor experience aspects of Christian faith. At NoWay Kingdom, the assigned clergyman had built a man-sized replica of the so-called Wreath of Christ (from Swedish – ‘Frälsarkransen’<sup>2</sup>) made up of beads whispering prayers. Normally the Wreath of Christ is a bracelet. Bible Island had a walk illustrating the ‘narrow path’ through life, and a few places provided the possibility to walk the stations of the cross, among them the Finnish Lutheran Church (Kirkkosaari). At His Love it was possible to be crucified next to Jesus on top of a grassy mountain. Several places had collections of resources (books, videos, slideshows, and so on) for the visitors to review.

On questions focusing on how the places relate to tradition, those regarding intentions, and in the open question about the places in general, many respondents pointed out how there was an aim to be open, inclusive, welcoming, and tolerant. Some owners emphasized how the place was open at any time and free to visit for prayer, socializing, or anything. The place “is available at any time for people to drop in and visit”, said one, and another claimed that “formal worship isn’t held but anyone can go there and it’s usable by anyone”. Others pointed toward how tolerant the places were intended to be. This might be one aspect of the progressive, innovative, and ‘rule bending’ nature of SL.

## 2.5 Tolerance versus dogmatism in style and spirit

One question this article raises is to what extent the studied places mixed different traditions – and if it is possible to relate this to SL as a medium. Before going into that question, we must once again highlight the fact that it is difficult to separate what is going on in SL from the physical world. In a time of ongoing secularization, including a higher degree of pluralization, and when institutionalized religion is being put on trial (at least in the Western world), ecumenism and the pick-and-mix approach to religion are outcomes to meet new demands when people are turning away from the religious institutions (Heelas & Woodhead 2005; Taylor 2007). Specific traditions

---

2 “Also known as the Pearls of Life, it is a pearl ribbon developed in 1995 by the Swedish Evangelic-Lutheran bishop emeritus Martin Lönnebo” (from Wikipedia).

and dogmatism are thus downplayed in favor of coming together in mutual understanding. Fundamentalism and the stern conviction of being the conveyor of the Truth are, however, the flipside of the coin (Emerson & Hartman 2006). Both outcomes can be seen in SL, but there is a clear tendency slant toward downplaying the role of tradition and formal affiliation and instead to have a more loose approach to formal adherence.

A total of 74% of all the owners (only one skipped this question) stated their site was related to a specific Christian tradition – 26% were an outreach ministry of a real-life church but 48% were not formally connected to a ‘real’ church. Thus there was a clear minority (28%) who did not relate to a specific tradition. However, when asked “if the site does not aim at being related to a specific Christian tradition – is there a mix of traditions instead?” 68% (of the 34 respondents) answered that they mixed traditions – 47% did so intentionally, and 21% did so for no specific reason. In other words, most places were designed with a specific tradition in mind but they were still open to including different and non-traditional elements into their sites.

Quite a few of the respondents emphasized how the places were “designed without dogma or preaching. It is a place designed to show God’s love for you, nothing else”. Also, places that were designed in accordance with specific traditions still stressed openness and tolerance and how they were designed to show God and the gospel in general rather than in line with a specific tradition. As one owner expressed it, “We follow what the Bible says and don’t worry too much about what tradition or style we follow.” A couple of places have a “specific focus on being inclusive and welcoming to all Second Life residents who are LGBT”. Or, as the owner of a sponsored Methodist church said, “It accepts everyone, no matter their religion, sexual preference, belief in God, etc.”.

All interviewees mentioned the open spirit of SL as an asset. Because people are as anonymous as they want to be through their avatars, and because social barriers and conventions are weak, it is a short cut to go into deep and existential discussions. This is seen as an advantage of SL. Persons can protect their identity behind their avatar and thus be more open with their inner life to an extent that rarely happens in ‘real life’ according to, for example, Arzibou and Telling. Arzibou mentioned how he came into contact with groups who felt misunderstood and excluded in ‘ordinary’ churches – groups such as bikers, the Goth community, and the so-called furies (according to Wikipedia – “a subculture interested in fictional anthropomorphic animal characters with human personalities and characteristics”). Both Starbrook-Yosuke and Telling also mentioned how they met people they normally would not meet in their offline church.

In the survey material, it was rarely expressed that tradition and obedience to specific dogmas were important, and instead the opposite – openness and tolerance – were often emphasized. It is impossible to claim that SL Christianity is inclusive as a rule, but the tendency to be so is clear. Openness toward dogmas and tradition can also be seen through architecture and artifacts. Thus

even though most sites adhere to a specific tradition, many places are open to mixing styles and elements from different Christian traditions.

### 3 Tradition versus innovation

The Christian places in SL are in other words simultaneously time both innovative and deeply rooted in traditions and established concepts of what a church is (both in terms of the church building and in terms of the community of Christians). However, in the same way that other technologies and media have changed our understanding of the world and our epistemological framework (a famous example is the printing press (Eisenstein 1980)), the internet is claimed to change our perception of our self and the conditions in which we live. But rather than inducing a sharp division between the old and the new, the online and the offline, the artificial and the real, our approach seeks to understand how the two realms of reality are intertwined. The Christian places in SL are good examples of the mix between the virtual world and the physical world (further developed in Gelfgren 2014), and the owners see their places as related, and as a complement, to the offline world.

One of Bolter and Grusin's (1999) concepts is 'remediation', which is the process in which older media reappear in newer media – how “one medium is itself incorporated or represented in another medium” (p. 45) – meaning that there is no sharp divide between different media. They claim further that “[n]o medium, it seems, can now function independently and establish its own separate and purified space of cultural meaning” (p. 55). It is a misunderstanding to believe that a new medium can be something completely new because they always rely upon previous media and our understanding of them. Digital virtual worlds are a novelty in the meaning that it has never before been possible to technologically construct a medium that immerses the user into the medium itself to the extent a virtual world does. Bolter and Grusin use the term 'transparent immediacy' to describe the situation where the medium disappears and the spectator becomes an active player within the medium. Still, we cannot understand virtual reality without understanding film, television, print, and so on.

The virtual world, and this is clear in the case of SL, is to a large extent an extension and a representation of the 'first life', the physical world. The environments are not photorealistic but still provide reasonable representations of reality. The assumption that it is even possible to do something radically different and completely imaginative tends to be a misconception. The respondents expressed such views in relation to the constructions of the Christian places. In most cases, the owners wanted to do, and build, something recognizable. For example, both Arzibou and

Telling mentioned how it is an advantage if people feel instantly at home, and thus know the purpose of the building. If they wished to create a Christian community and a Church, they did it using well-known templates. Architecture, artifacts, and sculpted landscapes gave a sense of the familiar. They built a church because they wanted a church, and places for socialization and fellowship were constructed as ‘ordinary’ parks, houses, and fireplaces. Second Life remediates well-known places and spaces, and the same phenomenon is found for rituals in virtual worlds according to Miczek (2008):

The leaders of online Christian communities tried to transfer the services which are already known from offline scenarios into Virtual Worlds. Creative inventions are therefore rather an exception than a regular case. The participants get a sense of continuity which allows them to feel safe in an environment which is perceived insecure and instable.

However, as Hutchings (2010) points out, the familiar and recognizable “offer a platform for change” (p. 83), and this will be dealt with below.

It is also possible to claim that these places are hybrid spaces that intertwine the physical world with the virtual. In the early 1990s, ‘cyber/digital religion’ was seen as a competitor to religion as practiced in the physical world. More recent research shows, and which the respondents confirmed in interviews (for example, Arzibou, Telling, and Cuthbertsson), how digital religion complements offline religiosity (Hutchings 2011). Cuthbertsson claims:

We do not want to be viewed as an alternative to or substitute for offline churches (unless the person who attends our ministry is unable to attend a church in real life... such as disabled, or is of another religion and would be persecuted for attending a Christian church). We encourage those who attend to become involved in a real life church

In the 1990s, it was assumed that new forms of religion would emanate from cyberspace, and even if that is still possible, the prevalent situation is more about how traditional religious faith has moved to the Internet and thus, to a certain extent, has become transformed in both structure and practice. According to Lindgren, Dahlberg-Grundberg & Johansson (2014), who emphasize hybridity claim that “the online and the offline dimensions, which were formally thought of as mutually exclusive or at least conflicting, are becoming intertwined. This is both in reality and idea” (p. 1). “[W]hat goes on in hybrid media culture can be understood as a product of the suspension of the delimitation inherent in the online/offline divide” (p. 2).

In the case of SL Christianity, the division between online and offline is consequently blurred. Tendencies to change seem rather low, especially in terms of expressions and styles. According to the empirical material for this article, standards and formats set in the offline world

are taken into the virtual world with only some transformations. Most places have a traditional church made out of virtual brick and mortar, and most of their owners claim that they adhere to specific Christian traditions. There is a mixing of offline traditions in the virtual places, but the main difference is their claimed openness and tolerance due to their focus on the word of God as they see it.

Even though both the concepts of ‘remediation’ and ‘hybridity’ are used to stress how these virtual places depend upon their physical predecessors, there is something new about the Christian places. The concept of affordance can furthermore be used to highlight how the design of an object, or a medium, encourages and constrains certain uses of it. Affordance refers to the relation between an actor and how the actor perceives and uses an object (Gibson 1977). It encapsulates how “[p]eople perceive the environment directly in terms of its potentials for action, without significant intermediate stages involving memory or interferences” (Gaver 1991, p. 79). It is connected to the object itself and to the environmental, cultural, and social settings the object is situated in (Gaver 1991). Different actors respond differently toward an object or, in this case, a medium. But there are also constraints and conventions to how objects are used. Some constraints and conventions are connected to cultural groups and how they perceive the object. According to Norman (1999), “a convention is a constraint in that it prohibits some activities and encourages others” (p. 41). Conventions also evolve over time, and they require a community of practice. When owners, the community of practice, express the idea that they built a church because they wanted a church, they formulate their conventions of how a church is supposed to be. Simultaneously they use the perceived affordances of the internet as an open and anti-hierarchical environment when bending the boundaries of established traditions.

Adherence to established traditions is important among the Christian places, but at the same time they are seen as progressive and innovative by their owners. The aim to create an open, friendly, and tolerant environment (although definitions of such an environment can vary) is a reoccurring theme, but the question is if it is the medium itself that supports such a direction. Given the fact that many owners have other roles in SL compared to their “real life”; that the Christian places are constructed to support socializing and fellowship rather than to focus solely on formal services; that the places aim to support tolerance rather than dogmatism; and that the interviewees mentioned anonymity and openness as assets in SL compared to their offline experience, it seems as though the affordance of SL encourages transformation and slightly novel forms of Christian faith and practices compared with the physical world.

## 4 Conclusion

It is a false assumption to believe there is a clear division between the virtual and the physical world, and this has been noted previously. When the church (referring to both the building and the congregation of believers) is remediated through Second Life many aspects of the offline church are still present. The church buildings, and the places in general, are, in that sense, hybrid. They represent and complement the church in the offline world, and in that way the virtual church is a mix of the digital and the physical. The churches reflect the traditional hierarchical structure, with for example pews, pulpit, and stage, but despite the similarities the virtual church is still not the same as the church in the physical world. The affordance of the virtual world has a tendency to move SL Christianity into a more open, tolerant, and flexible state toward other traditions and beliefs. Institutionalized Christianity in the Western world is currently being undermined and challenged as the dominating systems of beliefs. In such a context, representatives of SL Christianity can be seen as pioneers who are exposed to an open religious market in which anything is possible. Still, however, they often choose to follow established lines of thinking and construction to a large extent. As one of the respondents said when asked if there was a reason why they had built an easily recognizable church – “We wanted attendees to feel like they were in a church.”

## Interviews

Telling, Helios (5/3/14)

Arbizu, Daniel (21/11/11)

Pexington, Markus (10/4/14)

Starbrook-Yosuke, Lady (21/3/14)

Cuthbertson, Grace (16/3/13)

## Literature

Anderson, JW 1999, ‘The Internet and Islam’s new interpreters’, in JW Anderson & DF Eickelman (eds), *New media in the Muslim world: the emerging public sphere*, Indiana Univ. Press. Bloomington, pp. 41–56.



- Boellstorff, T 2008, *Coming of age in second life : an anthropologist explores the virtually human*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Bolter, JD & Grusin, R 1999, *Remediation : understanding new media*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Brasher, B 2001, *Give me that online religion*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Campbell, H 2010, *When religion meets new media*. Routledge, London.
- Campbell, H (ed.) 2013, *Digital religion : understanding religious practice in new media worlds*, Routledge, London.
- Campbell, H 2013 June 23, *Religious digital creatives as new cultural and religious authorities*. Presented at the ‘Who do you tweet that I am?’, Santa Clara, CA. Retrieved Okt 08, 2014, from [http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/usccb.site-ym.com/resource/collection/A9A2ECDD-B992-44A3-BBAB-CD0F03AD582A/Religious\\_Digital\\_Creatives\\_as\\_New\\_Campbell\\_Cultural\\_and\\_Religious\\_Authorities.pdf](http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/usccb.site-ym.com/resource/collection/A9A2ECDD-B992-44A3-BBAB-CD0F03AD582A/Religious_Digital_Creatives_as_New_Campbell_Cultural_and_Religious_Authorities.pdf).
- Castells, M 2003, *The Internet galaxy: reflections on the Internet, business, and society*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Cheong, PH 2012, ‘Authority’, in H Campbell (ed.), *Digital religion: understanding religious practice in new media worlds*, Routledge, New York, pp 72–87.
- Cheong, PH, Fischer-Nielsen, P, Gelfgren, S & Ess, C (eds) 2012, *Digital religion, social media and culture : perspectives, practices and futures*, Peter Lang, New York.
- Cohen, Y 2012, *God, Jews and the media: religion and Israel's media*, Routledge, New York.
- Derrickson, K 2008. ‘Second Life and the sacred: Islamic space in a virtual world’, in *Digital Islam*. Retrieved Okt 08, 2014, from <http://www.digitalislam.eu/article.do?articleId=1877>.
- Eisenstein, EL 1980, *The printing press as an agent of change*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Emerson, MO, & Hartman, D 2006, ‘The rise of religious fundamentalism’, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 32(1), pp. 127–144.
- Estes, D 2009, *SimChurch: being the Church in the virtual world*. Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan.
- Gaver, WW 1991, ‘Technology affordances’, in *Proceedings of the 1991 ACM CHI Conference*. New Orleans, LA.
- Gelfgren, S 2014, ‘Hybrid churches: transcending the physical, virtual and sacred’, in S Lindgren (ed.), *Hybrid media culture: sensing place in a world of flows*, Routledge, New York, pp. 123–138.

Gelfgren, S & Hutchings, T 2014, 'The virtual construction of the sacred – representation and fantasy in the architecture of Second Life churches', *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, 27(1), pp. 59–73.

Gibson, JJ 1979, *The ecological approach to visual perception*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, Mass.

Grieve, G 2010, 'Virtually Embodying the Field: Silent Online Buddhist Meditation, Immersion, and the Cardean Ethnographic Method' *Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet: Vol. 04.1 Special Issue on Aesthetics and the Dimensions of the Senses*. Retrieved Okt 08, 2014, from <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/11296/>, pp. 35–62.

Heelas, P & Woodhead, L 2005, *The spiritual revolution : why religion is giving way to spirituality*, Blackwell, Malden, Mass.

Helland, C 2005, *Online religion as lived religion. methodological issues in the study of religious participation on the Internet*. Retrieved Oct 08, 2014, from <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/5823/>, pp. 1–16.

Hoover, S & Echchaibi, N 2012, 'The "third Spaces" of digital religion', Presented at the 'Finding religion in the media: work in progress on the third spaces of digital religion', Boulder, CO: Center for Media, Religion and Culture, University of Colorado.

Hutchings, T 2010, 'The politics of familiarity: visual, liturgical and organisational conformity in the online Church', *Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, 4(1). Retrieved Okt 08, 2014, from <http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/archiv/11298>, pp 6386.

Hutchings, T 2011, 'Contemporary religious community and the online community'. *Information, Communication & Society*, 14(8), pp. 1118–1135.

Jenkins, H 2006, *Convergence culture : where old and new media collide*, New York University Press, New York.

Linden Lab 2013, *Infographic: 10 Years of Second Life*. (2013, June 20). *lindenlab.com*. Retrieved June 30, 2014, from <http://lindenlab.com/releases/infographic-10-years-of-second-life>.

Lindgren, S (ed.) 2013, *Hybrid media culture: sensing place in a world of flows*, Routledge, New York.

Lindgren, S, Dahlberg-Grundberg, M, & Johansson, A 2014, 'Hybrid media culture: an introduction', in *Hybrid media culture: sensing place in a world of flows*, Routledge, New York, pp 1–15.

Martin, D 2010, *The future of Christianity: reflections on violence and democracy, religion and secularisation*, Ashgate, Farnham.

McLuhan, M 1964, *Understanding media : the extensions of man*, Routledge, London.

Metrics. nd, *Daniel Voyager's Blog*. Retrieved June 30, 2014, from <http://danielvoyager.wordpress.com/sl-metrics/>.

Miczek, N 2008, 'Online rituals in virtual worlds: Christian online service between dynamics and stability', 3(1). Retrieved Okt 08, 2014, from [http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/frontdoor.php?source\\_opus=8293](http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/frontdoor.php?source_opus=8293), pp. 144–173.

Morozov, E 2011, *The net delusion : the dark side of internet freedom*, Public Affairs, New York.

Ong, WJ 1982, *Orality and literacy : the technologizing of the word*, Methuen, London:.

Radde-Antweiler, K 2007, 'Cyber-Rituals in Virtual Worlds, Wedding-online in Second Life', *Masaryk University Journal of Law and Technology*, 1, pp. 185–196.

Rainie, L & Wellman, B 2012, *Networked: The New Social Operating System*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.

Rheingold, H 2002, *Smart mobs: the next social revolution*, Perseus Pub. Cambridge, Mass.

Taylor, C 2007, *A secular age*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass..

Turner, F 2006, *From counterculture to cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the rise of digital utopianism*, University Of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Örnberg Berglund, T 2009, *Making sense digitally : conversational coherence in online and mixed-mode contexts*. Umeå: Department of Language Studies, Umeå University, Umeå.

## Biography

STEFAN GELFGREN is Associate professor in Sociology of Religion at HUMlab and the Department of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies, Umeå University, Sweden. His interests concern primarily the relation between social and religious transformations throughout history – with focus on the 19<sup>th</sup> century and contemporary society. He wrote his thesis about a Swedish 19<sup>th</sup> century confessional revivalist movement within the discipline of the History of Science and Ideas. Today his work primarily focuses on Christianity in relation to digital media.

Stefan Gelfgren  
Associate professor  
HUMlab/Dept. of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies  
Umeå University  
Sweden  
[stefan.gelfgren@humlab.umu.se](mailto:stefan.gelfgren@humlab.umu.se)

# Digital Participatory Culture: Transnationality, Fandom & Diversity

## Religion and Gender in German-written Fan Fiction and Fan Forums

Lisa Kienzl

### Abstract

The focus of this paper is to discuss the mediatization of religious elements and gender in popular US television series and German online fan culture (specifically fan fiction written in German) as part of an overall transnational participatory culture on the Internet. For the purposes of this paper, examples from the television series *Supernatural* and its German online fan culture have been selected to analyze the similarities and disconnections in the discussion of religion and gender in a transnational media discourse. At this point, the Foucaultian of power within the discourse representing religion in narrative texts and discussions is prominent. This idea reveals significant insights into a transcultural reciprocal development regarding the audiences' interpretation of mediatized religious elements and gender in online participatory culture.

### Keywords

religion, mediatization, television series, gender, participatory culture, fandom

## 1 Introduction

With regard to the relationship between religion and gender in modern media, I had to ask myself a central question at the beginning of my reflections: Why have productions of genres such as mystery, horror and fantasy, or productions enriched with key elements of these genres, gained such popularity in contemporary Western societies? *The Lord Of The Rings*, *Harry Potter*, *Twilight* or *The Hunger Games* – to name only a few major movie productions of recent years – show a trend towards grand, mythical and sometimes also religious narratives. But not only in Hollywood do we

---

find this development; it is also an essential part of current television productions. In contemporary television narratives, the religious motif of the apocalypse or the struggle of a (usually) male mythical hero against (supernatural) evil is once again of vital significance. Considering the small screen, it is clear that in the last decade there has been a marked increase in the appearance of narratives that are heavily influenced by religion and thus, so-called grand narratives have found their way into television productions. For example, the narratives of the television series *Supernatural* (2005 – onw.) are clearly oriented towards traditional power structures and thus, reproduce already known social traditional discourses, even though they also break with them frequently. The representation of religion and gender is a central theme in established discourses of power within western societies. In my opinion, it cannot be assumed that individuals explicitly force this discursive representation, but that the trend towards these narratives is influenced by social discourses of power.

*Supernatural's* narrative tells the story of two brothers, Sam and Dean Winchester, fighting evil in an apocalyptic Judeo-Christian setting and in a world populated by demons, angels, as well as many supernatural characters taken from various mythologies and religious systems. With this television series as an example, I am concentrating especially on the genres of fantasy, horror and mystery, not only because of their attachment to grand, mythical narratives but also because of their intense fan culture. Fan homepages are built to explain the religious and supernatural elements within the narratives and in the fan culture some parts of the representations are continued in an interpretive as well as partially reproductive way. Following the reasoning set forth by the transformation of religion and the depiction of gender in popular television series, I hypothesize that there is a significant relationship between these two discursive categories. The often traditional depictions of gender are sometimes accepted by the fan community in fan fictions, but are just as readily neglected and transformed into new storylines. Interestingly, there is a different assumption on the acceptance of religious elements, since it is remarkable that they are mostly not transferred, changed or ignored within fan culture but rather preserved.

## 2 Transnationality and Fandom

Primarily, popular Anglo-American television series dominate the television market around the globe and thus distribute a Judeo-Christian belief system, specific moral norms and gender roles, especially through the Western world. The influence of this on a worldwide scale and particularly on European culture has been neglected to a great extent within the scientific community, but I believe it is important for contemporary socio-cultural developments. Broadly

speaking, I agree with Jean K. Chalaby that the transnational impact is a result of global broadcasting through cross-national television and satellite ventures (Chalaby 2005). But as Annkatrin Bock points out, access to television narratives is not restricted to the medium of broadcasting anymore but DVD's, books, comics, or television series websites are part of a transnational transmediality too (Bock 2013, 391). Moreover mobility and flexibility of human behavior is not only recently part of the repertoire. Transnationality has been increasingly considered from a real-life perspective, for example, in migration research and examined in terms of policy changes and the impact of these developments on social and cultural discourses. However, these transnational aspects have only been brought to our attention in the last few years. In particular, Aihwa Ong has noted in this regard that discursive power processes are not interrupted by transnationality. "Indeed, even under conditions of transnationality, political rationality and cultural mechanisms continue to deploy, discipline, regulate, or civilize subjects in place or on the move." (Ong 1999, p. 19)

In the global market of film and television productions in general, the dominance of American productions is to be recognized. Of course, many European countries also have an important influence on important television productions or produce their own television series and films, but American productions are by far the most frequently watched worldwide. However, the influence of the UK and Canada as important countries of production should not be underestimated. This leads to the conclusion that Anglo-American films and television series and furthermore, productions in the English language dominate this media sector. By the term 'Anglo-American' I am not referring to one specific state but geographically the North American continent, USA and Canada, as well as the UK. All other Western countries play a minor role in the media market and in particular in the (for this paper) relevant genres of horror, mystery and fantasy television series.

The dominance of Anglo-American productions consequently results in productions being influenced in their content by the prevailing social conditions. A specific interpretation of religion, and gender roles in particular, is evident in the mystery, horror and fantasy genres, all of which come from the social dimension of Western societies. Therefore many productions are explicitly defined by Christianity, and to a certain extent, as in the example of *Supernatural*, also partly by Judaism and religious elements taken from this social context. This does not mean that these television series are productions of active religious communities; on the contrary. But it spreads a particular interpretation of these religious elements in a specifically Western view of religion globally. This dissemination of religious elements as well as gender depiction throughout the world has an impact on different societies and shows the significance of transnational developments.

When thinking about religion and media we need to discuss the idea of mediatization of religion as Stig Hjarvard suggests in his well-known paper presented at the IMRC in 2006. He argues that the depiction and transformation of religion in modern media is hardly an expression of

a new re-sacralization, but an expression of religion's mediatization (Hjarvard 2006). I agree with him, but have to state that when discussing the mediatization of religion, I would not use the term 'banal' religion to describe it - especially when there is such an intense attempt at accuracy in the definition of a religious origin as in *Supernatural's* narrative and fan culture. This transformation of religious elements is not a return to "primary and fundamental" (Hjarvard 2006, 6) religious ideas but a recirculation of (often institutionalized) religious knowledge. Here I agree with Tomas Axelson, that we have to be careful with the use of the term 'banal'. It is necessary to establish that "this kind of meaning-making takes place commonplace in everyday life but is complex enough not to be treated with awkward pejorative labels" (Axelson 2014, 3). However, I am not sure if it is better to define this meaning-making process as "vernacular" (2014, 3), like Axelson suggests.

Returning to the discussion on the transnational dimension of American television series and its influence on parts of European societies, we need to consider the definition of the term transnationality carefully.

Transnationality means that some agents are characterized by relatively dense and continuous cross-border transactions. This could have implications for other heterogeneities and raises the question whether, and to what extent, markers such as ethnicity, nationality, religion and so on are all (also) constituted across borders of national states (Faist 2013, 43)

Accordingly, it is clear that transnationalism contributes discursive power processes across regional and national boundaries. In the context of this paper, this now means that Anglo-American, and in particular American, productions play an important role for the global audience. According to Jeremy Tunstall the influence of American television has changed and is declining (Tunstall 1977; Tunstall 2006). Nevertheless, I argue that the influence of Anglo-American television productions still is extremely important.

Today, especially American television series dominate the television market beyond the Western hemisphere. In October 2011 Alice Jester started a call on her website [thewinchesterfamilybusiness.com](http://thewinchesterfamilybusiness.com) for *Supernatural's* fans from all over the world to answer some questions about the distribution of this television series in their home countries. This indicates that *Supernatural's* audience is not only found in Western societies but all over the world. Fans from more than 50 countries, such as Chile, Canada, Finland, United Arab Emirates, South Africa, as well as Russia and South Korea responded to Jester's request and posted information about airings and the latest Season on her homepage.<sup>1</sup> Digital technologies (including illegal downloads) make

---

1 See: <http://www.thewinchesterfamilybusiness.com/index.php/news/27-news-and-announcements/16511-supernatural-fans-outside-the-us-i-need-your-help>. Further also see: [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0460681/releaseinfo?ref\\_=tt\\_ql\\_10#releases](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0460681/releaseinfo?ref_=tt_ql_10#releases).

the series accessible to a global audience from Canada to Iran, Kazakhstan, to Malaysia, promoting Christian as well as Jewish ideology, redesigned, transformed, and remediated by this television narrative. At this point, I also recognize illegal downloading as part of this distribution, primarily because it reveals the audience's interest in the television series. If you are not fascinated by something you would not download it illegally, also because the illegal market is massive. For example for the year 2011, the file-sharing company Rapidshare published numbers of 42 million users per day.<sup>2</sup>

Despite that, the influence of American culture in the form of television narratives on a worldwide audience has only partly been discussed, as previously mentioned. Due to my location in a German-speaking area, I wanted to analyze this influence on this part of Europe, in particular, on the German-written fan fiction as part of fan culture. I believe that the ideas of religion and gender brought to the German-speaking area conveyed by an American television series can be seen as a reflection of broader developments of transnationality. In this connection, not only my European point of view of an American television series and its narrative construct, but also the semiotic approach of deconstructing signs and codes within this narrative (Peirce 1998) is the emphasis in this paper. Above all, the semiotic perspective on the transformation of religious elements from our real society into a fictitious television narrative gives an insight into the discursive practice of transforming and mediatizing religion. These narratives that hold religious, mythical or supernatural elements, obviously work in a globalized world after postmodernism. Even though *Supernatural* is a Western production, its audience is part of a worldwide transnational discourse of television distribution and reception. And because of that, the narrative disseminates Western ideas of religion and gender all around the world. As Connell argues in terms of gender: "On a global scale, the most profound change is the export of the European/American gender order to the colonized world." (Connell 1995, 199). We may assume a similar discursive process for the distribution of the Western concept of religion.

The assumption that these Western television narratives have a universal element and that they may be considered as disconnected from socio-political and cultural developments is problematic and reminds us of ethnocentric, colonial perspectives on the world. We should not assume that anything happens without a connection to specific social discourses because nothing exists in isolation, even less when we consider transnational and global developments. Maybe these television narratives should be defined not according to their supposed universalism but as part of a transformational transnational discourse that obviously addresses a greater audience around the world even though it is – as we see in the case of *Supernatural* – defined by Western and especially Judeo-Christian ideals of narration and gender.

---

2 See: [http://www.cnbc.com/id/41356625/Piracy\\_Rules\\_the\\_Web\\_Dominating\\_23\\_8\\_of\\_Internet\\_Traffic](http://www.cnbc.com/id/41356625/Piracy_Rules_the_Web_Dominating_23_8_of_Internet_Traffic). For further information on this matter see: <http://jetzt.sueddeutsche.de/texte/anzeigen/436859>.



This analysis uncovers cultural transnationality as well as the influence of American dominated popular culture on the German-speaking fan community. Contemporary societal developments, especially regarding religion and gender, emerge in these discourses (Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 2013; Hills 2002). Within this general transformation discourse we see that there is still a special interest in religion or religious elements within the audience. Maybe this is an expression of the changing role of religion within Western societies. Religious traditions as well as religious institutions are no longer anchored in everyday life as they once were for the majority of European and North American societies.

The central question to be examined in this paper is how fans address religion and gender within participatory culture. Therefore we should differentiate between the terms ‘fan culture’ and ‘participatory culture’ which are similar but not totally alike. We have to see participatory culture as defined by the keywords: affiliation, expression, collaborative problem-solving and circulation, as suggested by Jenkins (2009, xi-xii). Fan culture and participatory culture often show similar aspects of an identity or community-building process. For example, participatory culture is based on low barriers to engagement, the support for creativity and sharing one’s artistic creations (2009, 5) which is also important for fan culture. Furthermore, the social aspect of being part of a community and believing in the significance of one’s work is important for many contributors. Also a form of informal mentorship may be part of these communities, “whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices” (Jenkins 2009, 6). However, participatory culture may also be experienced in communities connected through political or civic engagement. Besides that, a further analysis of the religious dimension of fandom itself would be interesting. Due to a lack of space, it is not part of this investigation. A fuller discussion of religion and fan culture will appear in a later publication. For further insights on this matter see also Matt Hills (2000, 73-84) or Jennifer Porter (2009, 271-280).

### **3 Participatory Culture**

People read books, watch movies or television series and play video games in part for pleasure (also a very important aspect) and in part to immerse into another world. Content and emotions conveyed in these different media give people the feeling of being part of the narrative. Thus, the most appealing quality of media is to address people and pull them into a different state of mind, so that time and space appear different from everyday life. The psychologist Mihály Csikszentmihályi defines this flow experience as especially appearing in sporting activities: “In contrast to normal life, flow activities allow a person to focus on goals that are clear and compatible”

(Csikszentmihalyi 1997, 30). He defines these experiences as active and states that passive activities like watching television rarely cause this state. At this point I partly disagree with him. Of course there is a difference between active and passive activities and the flow generated by both, but this alternative state of mind is exactly what is important for the audience of a television series. This condition of the flow requires a commitment to the cause that, however, creates a discursive interaction: people integrate their ideas and beliefs in the storyline of a narrative and since this is a reciprocal process their notions are influenced by it (Dill 2009, 14).

I understand the relationship between television series and fan culture as a discursive process that transfers elements from actual religious belief systems into television narratives and then into fan culture. Fans may also draw on their own religious experiences to describe and interpret religious elements within the television series. Similarly, they may identify with religious elements and gender depictions from the television narrative to enrich their fan experience. However, immersion in the television narrative goes beyond merely watching and identifying with the show. Many fans interact with and contribute to the wider fan community on the Internet. This collaborative creativity and community-building often happens on fan webpages based on wikis that explain most of the elements of the television series' narratives. All the webpages share the name wiki or wikia somewhere in their name and are distributed by the company Wikia, Inc.<sup>3</sup> The webpages enable fans to contribute, publish and be part of a greater participatory culture. These communities intensify the relationship with the fan object and connect them with kindred spirits. While being part of a participatory culture, many fans show a high engagement and commitment to their fan community by publishing their ideas in blogs, discussions, as well as fan fictions. In the case of *Supernatural*, fans are particularly engaged in writing fan fictions to continue, disrupt or change the series' complex narrative.

Some examples of fan culture emphasize the representation of religious elements and the representation of gender. Discussing the transformation of all these elements in fan culture would be fascinating, but would go beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore only the relationship between the representation of religion and masculinity has been analyzed in this paper. Selected examples of fan fiction that are relevant for the main theme of this paper have been selected for exploration. Here discussions taken out of fan forums especially were extremely interesting.

Even though there is a rich participatory fan culture within the German -speaking area, this form of fan culture seems to be a phenomenon that presents itself internationally, but is dominated by the English-speaking world., This however should not lead to the conclusion that German fan culture is less committed or less interested in *Supernatural*'s narrative. I strongly disagree with such an assumption. What is clear however, is that information is often taken from English texts and thus

---

3 See: <http://www.wikia.com/Wikia>.

from the Anglo-American conception of these. At the same time on the English homepage, efforts are made to recognize the multilingual dimension of transnational fandom by establishing a German section on the English homepage.<sup>4</sup> This shows that the German society is shaped not only by television series originating from an English-speaking context but also that fan culture of this television series is strongly connected to the Anglo-American cultural background.

For the analysis of this transnational development, fan fictions from two different German Internet forums and webpages, *fanfiktion.de* and *myfanfiction.de* have been selected to analyze the similarities and disconnections in the portrayal of gender in a continued religious narrative. At this point, the Foucaultian idea of power within the discourse representing religion and gender in different narrative texts is prominent (Foucault 2008). I should mention that all elements taken from fan fictions are openly accessible on these webpages. So, no private texts or discussion elements have been used in this paper. Every passage or paragraph used in this analysis has already been published by the respective author online and is accessible to a wider audience.

### 3.1 *Online Discussions: Transnationality, Media and Gender*

Within fan culture, we find elements of *Supernatural*'s narrative not only in fan fictions but also in fan forums and the excited online discussion culture of the audience. I want not only to study the narratives of fan fiction but also the even more active and fascinating online discussion forums. I analyzed different discussions in fan forums on the already mentioned homepages *myfanfiction.de* and *fanfiktion.de* in general and one discussion in particular caught my attention. Here, the question of gender representation in the narrative of *Supernatural* and sexism is discussed in a thread. The discussion's title immediately points to a critical examination of gender in *Supernatural*: How sexist is *Supernatural*? (and do you watch it anyway?)<sup>5</sup>. Particularly exciting in this discussion is that even the question itself appears to be unclear to the German audience. When the initiator of the discussion posts a link to references of an ongoing discussion in English-speaking fan culture, these facts are dismissed.

---

4 "This page is a pilot page for German/multilingual entries in this wiki. If you are interested in joining the project, please contact the Super-wiki admin Jules." Here should be noted, that Jules is not from a German-speaking country but from Australia. <http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=Staffeln>.

5 FanFiktion.de, Forum / TV – Serien – Supernatural, Wie sexistisch ist Supernatural? (und guckt ihr trotzdem weiter?), <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/1567>>.

Participants in the German discussion define these critical discourses as unimportant or exaggerated.<sup>6</sup> First of all, the accusation of sexism is either rejected or objected to and defined as social reality.

Ich finde Supernatural nicht sexistisch, es spiegelt in dem Bezug eigentlich die Realität wieder. So wie Dean mit den Mädels umgeht, kenne ich das ebenfalls von hier, wenn ich mit Freundinnen zusammen weggehe. Es ist nun mal so.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore this statement also argues that in the fight against evil, there is no gender discrimination because demons have to be fought regardless of their gender. The general rejection of trends and themes in English-speaking fandom is particularly fascinating in terms of a transnational discourse. While this discourse is defined as positive in terms of the television series itself as well as information about it, serious social discussions of English-speaking fan culture are rejected.<sup>8</sup> This may originate in a generally critical European attitude towards the politics of the US. Further, that rejection could be related to the fact that the German-speaking region is still strongly defined by Adorno and Horkheimer, and their negative notion of media. These different positions with respect to the interpretation of television series are also due to variations in the social access to mass media (Horkheimer and Adorno 1973).

Thus, even with all the interest in American culture and its popular productions, there is a simultaneous rejection of uncomfortable themes, especially regarding the desired fan object, the television series. What is interesting is that this rejection also includes the English-speaking fan culture, or the choice of topics in the discussions there. Participants in the German discussion argue that it can be assumed that not many viewers actually deal with such issues. Nevertheless, towards the end of the discussion, the following comment argues that the accusations of sexism could possibly be true, but are not relevant to the audience.

Darüber habe ich, wie vermutlich ein Großteil der Leute, die die Serie sehen, nie nachgedacht. Ich meine, selbst wenn wir alle zusammen überzeugt werden, dass Supernatural sexistisch (!) ist (und ich

---

6 Anonymous user: “And besides, who cares if fictional creatures are discriminated against anyway? \*Needless\*” (translated by the author)FanFiktion.de, Forum / TV – Serien – Supernatural, Wie sexistisch ist Supernatural? (und guckt ihr trotzdem weiter?), <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/1567>>.

7 HunterBabe1989: “I think Supernatural is not sexist, in the reference actually reality is reflected. Just as Dean handles girls, I know this also from when I go out together with girlfriends. It is how it is.” (translated by the author)FanFiktion.de, Forum / TV – Serien – Supernatural, Wie sexistisch ist Supernatural? (und guckt ihr trotzdem weiter?), started on 08. January 2009, last accessed on 1. September 2014, <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/1567>>.

8 Topics on the English website are e.g.: “Workshop: M/F dynamics in M/M fic: wrongly applied gender roles and how to avoid them” or “Masculinity and social class”, <[https://delicious.com/metafandom/spn\\_gender](https://delicious.com/metafandom/spn_gender)>.

glaube, dass ist es), [...] man möchte doch unterhalten werden und sich nicht über die Gesellschaft, in der wir leben, Gedanken machen.<sup>9</sup>

This statement concludes that watching television should be entertaining and not a serious reflection of actual social situations. The admission of believing that *Supernatural* is sexist underlines the actual relevance of this topic. Yet, one of the next comments declares that it is not sexist even though the portrayed one-night stands indicate ambivalent depictions of sexuality. However, the women know exactly what they are getting involved in.

Ich finde es auch nicht sexistisch. Okay, Dean hat in fast jeder 2. folge ne andere Frau aber es ist ja nicht so als wüssten die Frauen nicht worauf sie sich einlassen.<sup>10</sup>

In summary, it is clear that this issue is not as alleged, does not exist or is not defined as important in German fan culture, at least as presented in this discussion. This discussion obviously occupies a central part of the perception of our real society in the television narrative. Nevertheless, in the argument of the discussion no relationship between reality and fiction is allowed. Interestingly, within the discussions investigated here, gender roles and their distribution are recognized as real and relevant issues, but that however does not affect the narrative of the television series or subsequently the fan fiction. This assumption is really fascinating for me.

The participants of this discussion recognize and accept the existence of a socially problematic distribution of gender roles, but simultaneously do not allow this topic to be discussed in fan culture. With this rejection, they seem to ignore their already -made reinterpretations of gender within their own fan fictions (such as integration of female characters, reinvention of masculinity, homosexuality,...). This argumentative position of rejecting the ambivalence of gender representation in *Supernatural* does not coincide with the results of the analysis of the fan fictions, even though participants in the discussion also wrote fan fictions that are part of the analysis. At this point I had to question and investigate whether the analysis was faulty or whether my assumptions of fan culture are superficial. Compared with Line Nybro Petersen's studies, similarities can be seen in the presentation of religion and gender roles within the studied fan fictions (Petersen 2013, 82-95). However, she does not report of such discontinuities within the same fan community. This fan

---

9 Blackninja: "Furthermore, I, like probably many of the people who watch the show, never thought of that. I mean, even if we all are convinced that *Supernatural* is sexist (and I believe that it is) [...] one wants to be entertained and not have to worry about the society in which we live." (translated by the author)FanFiktion.de, Forum / TV – Serien – *Supernatural*, Wie sexistisch ist *Supernatural*? (und guckt ihr trotzdem weiter?), <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/1567>>.

10 Jesaku: "I also think it's not sexist. Okay, Dean has in almost every episode another woman but it is not as if the women do not know what they are doing", (translated by the author)FanFiktion.de, Forum / TV – Serien – *Supernatural*, Wie sexistisch ist *Supernatural*? (und guckt ihr trotzdem weiter?), <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/1567>>.

community distances itself from a critical examination of the narrative of the television series, but at the same time writes critical fan fictions, in which female characters are integrated into the storyline or the heteronormative representation of the male characters is deconstructed. The fact that this contrary relationship between the narrative of the television show and the topics of the fan fictions is not recognized is surprising. It is doubtful that such a reflective level does not exist. The analyzed online discussion deals with the social dimension of gender representation in our society, but does not establish a connection to the gender depiction in the narrative of *Supernatural*. Accordingly, different approaches to the binary positions of reality/fiction, society/television in relation to gender roles must exist in both societies (US and Germany) and lead to these differing interpretations.

### 3.2 Online Discussions: Faith, Religion and Television

In relation to recent reflections on the modified terms of a contemporary knowledge discourse, to what extent is information about religious elements carried by a television series and fan culture and how is this information received by the audience? This question is difficult to answer, since watching television to a large extent is still part of the private dimension of the living room, a scientifically elusive area. Within the fan culture, we can obtain elements that are part of the narrative structure in online published fan fictions, information websites or discussion forums. To analyze the acceptance of religious elements and information about them in fan culture, I again analyzed the extremely valuable source material in discussion forums taken from *fanfiktion.de* and *myfanfiktion.de*. When selecting the threads, once again the religious dimension and the question of the representation of gender were in the foreground. Accordingly, I chose eight discussions from *fanfiktion.de*, which deal with three overarching themes: What is the fascinating thing about *Supernatural*, religion in *Supernatural* and finally the question of the distribution of gender roles in the narrative. On *myfanfiktion.de* only two relevant discussions were found, which argue with the fans' belief in the supernatural cosmology and the authenticity of *Supernatural's* narrative.

In the first discussion on *fanfiktion.de* the question of whether *Supernatural* is just a teen television series or something more than that was investigated. Many participants in the discussion argued that they expressly like the interpretation of mythology and the combination of different genres, where the fantasy element stands out. In addition, a critical examination of religion seems to be of interest to the viewer, even if the dominance of the religious narrative is viewed critically. Interestingly, it is pointed out that the distinction between reality and fiction in the self-definition as a fan has significance.

Realität kann ich aber noch von Fiktion unterscheiden.<sup>11</sup>

---

11 Gaya Lupin: "I still can distinguish between reality and fiction", (translated by the author) FanFiktion.de, Forum /

Regarding this subject of fiction and reality in a different discussion it is explained that in the intertextuality between fan fiction and the narrative of the television series, the lines often blur.<sup>12</sup> To that effect, it is also assumed that reality and fiction as well as real society and the narrative of *Supernatural* cross over. The relationship between reality and fiction, however, is frequently addressed in fan discussion. On the homepage *fanfiktion.de*, fans discuss that the representation of Lucifer in *Supernatural* has changed their idea about the devil. It is clear that the portrayal of the character, Lucifer has had an influence on the panelist's everyday life. One discussion participant argues that in official school education, the devil is portrayed entirely different as he is portrayed in the narrative of *Supernatural*. *Supernatural's* depiction changed the user's view about him and reveals how television narrative influences individual religious notions.

Ja klar du hast recht, er ist natuerlich trotzdem boese, aber ich kann ihn ein bischen besser verstehn, im Religionsunterricht habe ich nie gehoert dass Luzifer verstossen wurde weil er Gott zu sehr geliebt hat.<sup>13</sup>

This makes it clear that the representation of the narrative within the fan culture encourages the audience to question dominant religious ideas but simultaneously also reinforces Judeo-Christian elements within Western societies. Furthermore, television is perceived as another source of religious knowledge in their everyday life. The impact of the depicted religious elements on the audience is further discussed in four forum discussions.<sup>14</sup> For example, the question is raised whether *Supernatural* is based on an actual religion.

Ein paar Freundinnen von mir und ich haben uns letzgens gefragt, ob es vielleicht eine Religion/Sekte/ was auch immer gibt, die vielleicht an die Begebenheiten von Supernatrua(!) glaubt? Zum Beispiel das mit den Engeln, Dämonen, der Apokalypse etc. Das würde mich nämlich echt mal interessieren, das wäre doch echt verdammt cool!<sup>15</sup>

---

TV – Serien – Supernatural, Was ist so gut an Supernatural? <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/10367/1>>.

- 12 ShyLee: "Allerdings hat das bei mir zur Folge, dass die Serienrealität immer weiter mit der Fanficillusion verschwimmt. Ich weiß stellenweise gar nicht mehr, welche Handlungen tatsächlich in der Serie vorkamen und welche ich hier nur gelesen habe." "However, this has the consequence that the reality of the television series for me blurs with the fanfic-illusion. Sometimes I do not remember which actions actually occurred in the series and which I have just read in fanfics." (translated by the author). FanFiktion.de, Forum / TV – Serien – Supernatural, Wenn Wahrheit und Fiktion miteinander verschwimmen, <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/16160/1>>.
- 13 Anonymous user: "Yeah you're right, he is of course still evil, but I can kind of understand him better, in religious education, I have never heard that Lucifer was outcast because he loved God too much." (translated by the author) FanFiktion.de, Forum / TV – Serien – Supernatural, Was ist so gut an Supernatural? <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/10367/1>>.
- 14 The topics of these discussions are "Is there a Supernatural Religion", "The Supernatural Hell", "Do you think Season 5 feels differently about Lucifer," as well as "demons and other creatures of hell." (translated by the author.), last accessed on 1. September 2014, <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/f/26>>.
- 15 Melilein: "A few friends of mine and I have recently wondered if there might be a religion/cult/whatever out there

One answer to this question is that Christianity is the main model for the religious elements presented in *Supernatural*, while another answer differentiates between various religious systems, but refers in general to the Bible as the source for the religious elements in *Supernatural*. Nevertheless, one answer explains that all major religions include these kinds of religious elements, which again refers explicitly to the Abrahamic religions and not *all* religions.

Auch alle anderen „großen“ Religionen kennen Engel, Dämonen, göttliche Gerichtsbarkeit etc.”<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, the discussion arises whether Sam and Dean belong to a specific religion. While one user thinks Sam and Dean are Protestant<sup>17</sup>, another one argues, that they don't need a specific religion or have to believe anything because they already know what is true.<sup>18</sup> In the last discussion, addressing the subject of religion, “Do you believe all of this?”<sup>19</sup>, it becomes clear that a desire to believe in a higher power is a crucial issue. In addition, it shows that especially the Judeo-Christian origin of the depicted religious elements in *Supernatural* is awarded credibility.

so an die art wie sie in der serie dargestellt werden (engle [!], dämonen, Gott) glau (!) ich nicht drann (!)... [...] aber ich glaube schon daran dass es engel, „dämonen“, und auch gott gibt.<sup>20</sup>

This user comments decidedly on the belief he holds in angels, demons and God, even though not in the visual depiction of the television series. Here we see that mediatized religious elements in television series as well as actual religious narratives may not coincide all the time. Nevertheless, they address similar and well-known themes in Western societies.

All of these examples of textual passages from different fan webpages for *Supernatural* reveal that the mediatization process of religious phenomena is a complex and collaborative discourse of contemporary Western societies. We see that the audience is not necessarily interested

---

which might believe in the events presented in Supernatural (!)? For example, the angels, demons, the Apocalypse, etc. That would interest me really, that would be pretty damn cool!”(translated by the author)FanFiktion.de, Forum / TV – Serien – Supernatural, *Gibt es eine "Supernatural- Religion"?*, <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/12802/1>>.

16 LadyLaduga: “All the other ‘big’ religions know angels, demons, divine justice etc.”. (translated by the author)FanFiktion.de, Forum / TV – Serien – Supernatural, *Gibt es eine "Supernatural- Religion"?*, <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/12802/1>>.

17 Anonymous user. FanFiktion.de, Forum / TV – Serien – Supernatural, *Gibt es eine "Supernatural- Religion"?*, <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/12802/1>>.

18 Ametista: “Außerdem müssen sie ja gar nichts ‘glauben’ - sie wissen.” FanFiktion.de, Forum / TV – Serien – Supernatural, *Gibt es eine "Supernatural- Religion"?*, <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/12802/1>>.

19 Myfanfiction.de, *Supernatural*, *Glaubt ihr an all das?* <<http://www.myfanfiction.de/gruppen.php?gruppenid=350&thema=906>>.

20 Murphyne: “I do not believe that they are as they are shown in the series (angles, demons, God)... [...] But I do think that angels, “demons”, and God exist.” (translated by the author)Myfanfiction.de, *Supernatural*, *Glaubt ihr an all das?*, <<http://www.myfanfiction.de/gruppen.php?gruppenid=350&thema=906>>.



in being part of an institutional religion, however, religion itself is of interest. And even though a discussion of the definition of religion now would be rewarding, it is beyond the scope of this paper.

### 3.3 *Fan Fiction: Religion, Gender and Diversity*

Not only are discussions in fan forums fascinating but also fan fiction delivers an interesting insight into participatory fan culture. Fan fictions are written contributions that allow fans to reflect on their approval of or refusal to accept the original storyline. Jenkins puts forward the view that “fan writers do not so much reproduce the primary text as they rework and rewrite it, repairing or dismissing unsatisfying aspects, developing interests not sufficiently explored” (Jenkins 2013, 162). To assume that fan culture would only confirm and pass on traditional power discourses would be wrong. The production of texts within fan culture is to a certain degree based on hegemonic ideas about how knowledge is conveyed. This construction of knowledge is separate from an interpretation of this information as we will see in the next chapter. Especially in fan fiction but also in various fan forums, elements of the narrative are deconstructed and reinterpreted. In addition, traditional religious elements are re-interpreted and put into new contexts.

In particular the portrayal of masculinity in the apocalyptic narrative structure is of specific interest for me. The question as to what extent elements of *Supernatural*'s narrative change or remain the same in fan culture will be addressed. Of course, a comprehensive analysis of the entire source material of German fan culture regarding the television series *Supernatural* is not possible. Therefore, examples have been selected to demonstrate the transformation process of religious elements and to illuminate the acceptance or deconstruction of narrative images of gender in German fan culture.

To start with, a short reference to the two main homepages *fanfiktion.de* and *myfanfiktion.de* is necessary. From *Alarm für Cobra 11*, a German crime series, to *Zorro*, on the homepage *www.fanfiktion.de* more than 250 different television series can be found. The most popular television series are *Vampire Diaries* and *NCIS*, each with over 3,500 published fan fictions, closely followed by *Supernatural* with 3187.<sup>21</sup> On the webpage *myfanfiction.de* we find nearly 250 stories and fan fictions about *Supernatural*.<sup>22</sup> The content of these pages is not only focused on discussing film or television but also offers the possibility of publishing stories and fan fictions on film, literature or sports.

We have to realize that the discursive process regarding religion and gender does not end with the narrative structure of the television series. Within the reception of these categories in the

---

21 See: <http://www.fanfiktion.de/TV-Serien/c/101000000>.

22 See: <http://www.myfanfiction.de/texte/supernatural>.

audience, this discourse continues in fan fiction in different ways (Weber and Dixon 2007). On the one hand religious elements and gender depiction from the source text, the television narrative, are retained unchanged and often support hegemonic power and heteronormative discourses. On the other hand subversive and transgressive interpretations of religion and gender – based on the same source texts – appear in fan fiction. Summarized, fan fiction either develops new storylines by transforming characters and elements or continues with the well-known parts of the source text. Hellekson and Busse suggest three main areas of fan fiction: *gen*, *het* and *slash*. These terms are used to define the three categories within fan fiction. The characters in *gen* fan fiction are not primarily engaged in any way, and romantic feelings or sexual interactions are not the focus. *Het* refers to fan fiction that explicitly broaches the issue of heterosexual attraction, while in *slash* stories queer (regarding identity as well as sexuality) is at the center of interest (Hellekson and Busse, 10). This process of fan writing focuses on desire and imagination (Kaveney 2010, 243-247), but in the last two categories in particular, gender is an important element.

From this wealth of fan fiction and discussion forums, I have tried to focus on fan fiction with a religious narrative as this is the focus of this paper: stories with a religious or apocalyptic background therefore are of major interest to me. Furthermore, I was particularly interested in the representation of gender, and masculinity in particular, within these fan fictions. For the concrete analysis, I decided at first to have a general look at fan fiction represented on the two homepages *fanfiktion.de* and *myfanfiktion.de*.

Here, I chose two different approaches. First, I had a brief look at all 247 fan fictions addressing *Supernatural* on the homepage *myfanfiction.de* to consider and get an overview of the representation of religion and masculinity.<sup>23</sup> Second, I looked at the more than 3100 fan fictions regarding *Supernatural* on the homepage *fanfiktion.de*, concentrating particularly on the depiction of gender/masculinity within a religious/apocalyptic narrative. I was able to examine the different interpretations of the original television narrative and to narrow the selection down to 36 fan fictions that explicitly dealt with an apocalyptic, religious narrative. Rather than attempting to do a detailed sub-analysis of the fan fictions, given that some of them run to 100,000 words, I felt it more useful to give a general overview of the fan fiction with some detailed highlights and examples to underline broader developments.

I have concentrated on three aspects of the depiction of masculinity in the fan fictions, questioning firstly if the representation of the two male main characters of *Supernatural*, Sam and Dean, had changed in terms of their sexuality. Secondly, I focused on whether male characters established sexual or romantic relationships with other male characters or whether they continued to support heteronormative representations of sexuality. Thirdly, I investigated whether only the

---

23 See: <http://www.myfanfiction.de/texte/supernatural>.

original characters of the television narrative were taken into the fan fictions or if new, invented characters had been integrated.

In the 247 fan fictions published on *myfanfiction.de*, it was clear that there is a focus on the integration of new characters. Of the 247 fan fictions read, 40 % introduced a new, almost exclusively female character to the storyline. These female characters are assigned different positions within the narrative, but almost always stand beside the two main male characters, Sam and Dean, to complement and extend the dominant masculine narrative. In most cases, the female character appears in the active role of a young woman who comes into contact with the brothers or is even a hunter<sup>24</sup> herself. Also, a representation as a sister of the brothers appears in some cases. The focus, however, is on the fact that a large part of the female audience apparently feels that female characters are missing in the narrative.

The deconstruction of heteronormativity, especially in regard to a religious narrative, also seems of interest to fans. One user, Helena, asks herself, what would change for Dean and the story of the apocalypse if Sam were a Sally? Interestingly, hardly anything changes within her fan fiction that is taken directly from the basic themes of the Winchester family. At the beginning of Season 1, Sam is described as being in a relationship and living a life outside the hunting community, much like Sally in this fan fiction. The relationship between Helena's two siblings is also interpreted in a similar way to the television narrative. In the fan fiction, Dean visits Sally and asks for her help. In addition to that, the memories of the girl's past show that it appears to be reminiscent of the childhood of the Winchesters. The patriarchal masculinity images displayed in the narrative of the television series are not broken in this fan fiction even though Sam's character now is female. Furthermore, they are similarly handed down. On one hand, this shows that it takes more than just the introduction of a female character to change hegemonic structures and on the other hand, patriarchal dimensions are reinterpreted as Sally can adopt an equally central role in this religious narrative.<sup>25</sup>

It is interesting that 33% of the fan fictions stick to the preset of the television narrative or convert the characters of the narrative only minimally from their original depiction. To this end, only characters, who are actually present in the narrative of *Supernatural* occur in these fan fictions. However, variations of the narrative are often evident. 13% of the stories deal with further cross-fiction (e.g. mixing with characters from other television series), real-life fan fiction or deviating elements taken from *Supernatural*'s narrative structure. Essential at this point is that the nature of

---

24 The brothers are called 'hunters' since they not only fight evil but actually hunt supernatural, evil creatures down.

25 "What if Sam were a Sally. If the Winchesters were not two brothers, but Dean had a little sister. What would change? For Dean, for the story of Lucifer?" (translated by the author), <http://www.myfanfiction.de/texte/supernatural/just-one-change.244364.html>.

the characters, as well as the action, does not change comprehensively. In conclusion, the fact that 14% of fan fictions question heteronormativity and include slash stories is fascinating.

The 36 specifically selected, apocalyptic fan fictions from the homepage *fanfiktion.de* show similar results to the general overview on *myfanfiction.de*. These 36 stories were selected out of a total of 3187 fan fictions addressing *Supernatural*.<sup>26</sup> Because the source material was too extensive to examine even in an overview, for the fan fictions on this homepage, I focused on the narrative structure of the stories and looked at fan fictions that followed *Supernatural*'s apocalyptic narrative. By applying that selection criterion, 36 fan fictions, which explicitly address an apocalyptic setting, have been given a closer analysis. Similar to the previous analysis I look at the representation of the male characters from the television series and their portrayal in the religious and apocalyptic storyline. Again it turned out that in nearly half the fan fictions, - 44% - a female character was integrated, for example in the fan fiction about the huntress Christa. The prologue of the fan fiction portrays a female heroine and huntress called Christa, working with the brothers to fight evil in an apocalyptic setting, similar to that depicted in Seasons 4 and 5. This scene depicts her in the monastery at the end of Season 4, when Lucifer rises. At first she interprets a light she sees as a category of good and divine, but realizes that this is not the case. Dean tries to save her but a shadow shape explaining that God abandoned humans long ago pushes him away.

*Und Gott sprach: Es werde Licht.* Der Satz ging ihr immer und immer wieder durch den Kopf. Das Licht war Gottes Werk, symbolisierte das Gute. [...] Dieses Licht, das hier und jetzt auf sie zukam, war keineswegs warm, friedlich oder in irgendeiner Hinsicht gut. Sie hörte das Brüllen aus den Tiefen der Hölle. [...] „Christa!“ Die Jägerin hob ihren Kopf. Es war Deans Stimme, die durch das Kreischen der Hölle hindurchbrach. Erleichtert atmete sie auf. Sie war nicht allein. „Dean“, hauchte sie. [...] Wieder hörte sie ihren Namen. Doch es war nicht Dean. Sondern jemand anderes. Vor ihr erschien eine Schattengestalt. Christa kniff die Augen zusammen, wollte erkennen, wer auf sie zutrat. *Herr, du bist mein Hirte...* „Gott hat dich schon längst verlassen. Genau wie alle anderen“, sagte die fremde Gestalt.<sup>27</sup>

---

26 See: <http://www.fanfiktion.de/Supernatural/c/101083000>.

27 “*And God said, Let there be light.* This was the sentence she went over and over again in her head. The light was the work of God, symbolizing the good. [...] This light, which came towards her now was not warm, peaceful or good in any way. She heard the roar from the depths of hell. [...] “Christa!” The huntress lifted her head. It was Dean’s voice that broke through the shriek of hell. She sighed with relief. She was not alone. “Dean”, she breathed. [...] Again, she heard her name. But it was not Dean. It was someone else. Before her appeared a shadowy figure. Christa narrowed her eyes, wanted to know who approached her. *Lord, you are my shepherd...* “God has abandoned you long ago. Just like everyone else”, said the strange character.” (translated by the author) HunterBabe1989 2009, *Fan fiction. Supernatural - When God is Gone and the Devil Takes Hold*, <http://www.fanfiktion.de/s/4aa0376d00004cbc06514438/1/Supernatural-When-God-is-Gone-and-the-Devil-Takes-Hold-Ep-12-Season-5-Season-9->

Christa is portrayed as similar to the brothers within the apocalyptic fight against evil. The religious elements in the beginning and at the end of this paragraph echo The Book of Genesis and also address God in the first line of a well-known psalm. This establishes an even closer and more direct religious structure than that within *Supernatural's* narrative. However, when Christa starts praying, the shadow voice answers that God has abandoned her. Again this fan fiction stays true to the television narrative discussing important religious discourses about God's absence. Therefore this story clearly continues the religious elements from the television narrative and reinforces them.

Almost a third, 32 %, of the analyzed fan fictions from *fanfiktion.de* is based on *Supernatural's* representation of masculinity – again with variations, however, remaining within heteronormativity and hegemonic representations. I will not discuss them in much more detail because they evidently stick to the main elements of the television narrative. A significant difference is evident in the presentation of slash fan fiction. Nearly 22% of the apocalyptic fan fictions published on *fanfiktion.de* address this theme. This may be related, among other things, to the website management. For example, *fanfiktion.de* is much more structured and has severe restrictions and protections of minor users. This makes it a more attractive platform for the publication of sensitive material, such as that of slash fan fictions. Within these slash fan fictions, not only is sexuality at the center of interest (Hellekson and Busse 2006, 10), but also desire and the imagining of a love story (Kaveney 2010, 243-247). The religious and apocalyptic context of the fan fictions draws directly on the subject of obedience and good and evil. Central to the final battle against evil - here represented by demons and angels – is that the outcome does not depend on obedience to God, but on the love of the people.

Wo war ich nur gelandet? Wie bitte war ich hier hingekommen? Ein Engel des Herrn kämpft gegen Dämonen. Für ihn machte ich es. [...] Ich liebte meinen Vater und meine Brüder zwar aber ich kämpfte auch für das was ich wollte. [...] Er hatte mir ein Leben gezeigt, wie ich es noch nicht kannte und ich wollte es nicht missen. Ich kämpfte zwar gegen Dämonen und meine eigenen Brüder aber ich wusste wofür.<sup>28</sup>

What is remarkable about this text, and also the other apocalyptic narratives which were investigated, is that despite changes in the characters, the apocalyptic narrative does not change. The text passage is a monologue by the angel Castiel, addressing his love for the human, Dean. It

---

28 “Where did I end up? How did I get here? An angel of the Lord fighting against demons. For him I did it. [...] I loved my father and my brothers but I fought for what I wanted. [...] He had shown me a life, as I did not know and I did not want to miss. I fought against demons and my own brothers but at least I knew why.” (translated by the author) Brandzess 2013, *Brüder, Engel, Dämonen, Du und Ich - OS-Sammlung*, <http://www.fanfiktio.de/s/511a2021000239c006514438/3/Brueder-Engel-Daemonen-Du-und-Ich-OS-Sammlung>.

describes Castiel as a soldier of Heaven, who changes his priorities because of love. Again we see some resemblance to the television narrative and the idea that love may change everything.

Within the analyzed apocalyptic fan fictions, there are generally three important dimensions. First it is clear that for the authors of these texts the integration of female characters in the storylines is of central importance. The fans' textual productivity can be described as a largely female domain. Camille Bacon-Smith analyzed female fandom and concludes that in her survey 90% of the authors were female (Bacon-Smith 1992, 23). To establish a female character and add it to the original narrative provides a way to either become part of the story or to change it in relation to one's own ideas of the distribution of gender roles. This is echoed in Line Nybro Petersen's finding in her analysis of romance and spirituality in the fan culture of *Twilight*. Fan fiction offers the possibility to find a "new space for negotiating gender values and norms" (Petersen 2013, 82). Her conclusion regarding rejection and simultaneous approval of the existing gender roles in the narrative and religious ideas in *Twilight*, can be transferred to the German-speaking fandom of *Supernatural*. However, I still have to analyze the complex relationship between the depiction of religion and masculinity in the religious/apocalyptic narrative.

Second, it seems as if religious elements no longer encourage only traditional gender roles, but also strengthen other forms of gender depiction. Now, female heroines and homosexual relations between angels and humans are addressed in the narrative. Nevertheless, simultaneously in a good third of the fan fictions on both homepages, the hegemonic patriarchal representation of masculinity is maintained. This representation, however, does have other deviations from the original television narrative indicated by variations of the action or changes to the settings within the text. This makes it clear that approval of depicted forms of religion and masculinity does not simply lead to an unquestioned acceptance and continuation of the narrative.

Third, masculinity is deconstructed in relation to sexuality and thus new interpretations reject heteronormative ideas. This can be seen as a general trend in the fan culture. The productivity in fan culture, especially regarding fan fictions is caused, according to Henry Jenkins, by a combination of admiration and frustration. According to this assumption, the fans use the texts of the dominant popular culture and tailor them to their needs. In most cases, it is referred to as the reason for the subversive modification of a missing or under-representation of certain groups in society. On the one hand, this connects fans emotionally with the object of their desire, on the other hand, this calls for changes, de-continuation or expansion of the object itself (Jenkins 1992, 23).

These three dimensions affect the depiction and the relationship between religion and masculinity in various fan fictions. The apocalyptic narrative in relation to the television series itself should be seen as a separate dimension, a religious element. Furthermore, in fan culture this dimension becomes increasingly detached from a hegemonic, patriarchal and institutional religious

system. The apocalyptic narrative itself obviously satisfies an essential need for an epic, mythological or religious narrative. Essential here, however, is that the male, traditional hero is rejected, in his hegemonic role and is replaced by progressive, reflexive and modern male heroes. Second, he may retain this traditional role to some degree in the fan fiction, however, he shares his hero position with a female hero. Well over half of the studied fan fictions support this hypothesis and confirm the need for the adaptation of this narrative in the broader audience. Nevertheless, it should be noted at the same time that a religious narrative, such as the important apocalyptic narrative, carries essential Western norms and values that are associated with the representation of gender roles. We could summarize that for the depiction and the representation of masculinity in German fan culture, religious norms and values dominate regardless of whether hegemonic patriarchal or progressive-reflexive gender representations are integrated in the fan fictions. That means that religious elements, in particular ethical and moral ideas, are crucial for the narrative of the television series as well as fan fictions and therefore are judged as essential by the audience. Furthermore, the message that love can overcome all obstacles highlights the religious narrative.

#### **4 Conclusion**

Within the academic field of Religious Studies the topic of religion and media is a well-researched area, mainly focusing on the representation or the influence of religious groups on mainstream media (Hoover 2006). Studies often concentrate on media or television in general and not on individual programs. For example, Forbes and Mahan analyze the different dimension of the relationship between religion and popular culture, e.g. religion in popular culture and vice versa as well as popular culture as religion, but they do not concentrate on television narratives in particular (Forbes and Mahan 2000). I argue that there is a significant difference between the forms of representation of religion and gender in different types of media (Hoover, Stewart and Lundby 1997). Even with a focus only on television, there are still so many different categories and genres to look at (News, Reality, Crime,...), Popular television series in particular have received little scholarly attention from a religious studies' point of view and have not yet been discovered as the interesting and rewarding research area it is. Furthermore, the transformation and mediatization of religious elements and their relation to the depiction of gender within the narrative of popular television series, is a barely recognized field of research within religious studies. The transformation of television source texts and the representation of religious elements and gender in fan culture in general is a particularly enriching research area.

Participatory fan culture not only engages in discursive transformation processes of the mediatization of religion, but also reproduces, reconstructs and reinterprets gender depiction. In a number of fan fictions, the line between television narrative and social reality often becomes indistinct. We have to conclude that the narrative of *Supernatural*, heavily influenced as it is by religion, often supports traditional gender roles, even though the narrative challenges them consistently. While in the television narrative a new interpretation of hegemonic and heteronormative depictions of masculinity are evident, in fan fiction, either acceptance or a reflexive deconstruction of this power discourse appears. Specific religious themes, such as self-sacrifice, resurrection, good and evil, as well as ethical and moral values, are relevant in the depiction of religious narratives on both levels. Therefore, not only the transnationality of fan culture but also aspects of diversity in the discussion of religion and gender obviously leave room for further investigation.

## Literature

Axelsson, T. 2014, *The Soft Side of Mediatization: Fiction as a symbolic inventory for vernacular meaning making challenging the 'banal' notion in mediatization theory*", Paper presented at the 9th International Conference on Media, Religion, and Culture (IMRC), August 4 - 6 2014, Canterbury, UK.

Bacon-Smith, C. 1992, *Enterprising Women. Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.

Bock, A. 2013, „Der ‚Zuschauer von morgen‘ – Fernsehserienrezeption im Wandel.“, in S Eichner et. al. (ed.), *Transnationale Serienkultur. Theorie, Ästhetik, Narration und Rezeption Neuer Fernsehserien*, Springer, Wiesbaden, 381-394.

Boorstin, J. 2011, *Piracy Rules the Web, Dominating 23.8% of Internet Traffic*, published on 31. January 2011, last accessed on 1. September 2014.

<[http://www.cnn.com/id/41356625/Piracy\\_Rules\\_the\\_Web\\_Dominating\\_23\\_8\\_of\\_Internet\\_Traffic](http://www.cnn.com/id/41356625/Piracy_Rules_the_Web_Dominating_23_8_of_Internet_Traffic)>

Brandzess 2013, *Brüder, Engel, Dämonen, Du und Ich - OS-Sammlung*, created on 12. February 2013, last edited on 5. August 2014, last accessed on 1. September 2014,

<<http://www.fanfiktio.de/s/511a2021000239c006514438/3/Brueder-Engel-Daemonen-Du-und-Ich-OS-Sammlung>>.

Category:Deutsch 2013, published on 28. August 2013, last accessed on 1. September 2014

<<http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=Staffeln>>.



Chalaby, J.K. 2005, 'Towards an Understanding of Media Transnationalism', in J.K. Chalaby (ed.), *Transnational Television Worldwide: Towards a New Media Order*, I.B. Tauris London/New York, pp. 1-13.

Connell, R.W. 1995, *Masculinities*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. 1997, *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*, Basic Books, New York.

Dill, K. E. 2013, *How Fantasy Becomes Reality: Seeing Through Media Influence*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Faist, T. 2013, 'Multiculturalism. From Heterogeneities to Social (In)equalities', in P. Kivisto & Ö. Wahlbeck (eds.), *Debating Multiculturalism in the Nordic Welfare States*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, pp. 22-47.

FanFiktion.de, Das FanFiction Archiv 2014, last accessed on 1. September 2014, <<http://www.fanfiktion.de/TV-Serien/c/101000000>>.

—, Das FanFiction Archiv, Kategorie: Fanfiktion / TV-Serien / Supernatural 2014, last accessed on 1. September 2014, <<http://www.fanfiktion.de/Supernatural/c/101083000>>.

—, Forum / TV – Serien – Supernatural, *Gibt es eine "Supernatural- Religion"?*, posted on 03. October 2011; last accessed on 1. September 2014, <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/12802/1>>.

—, Forum / TV – Serien – Supernatural, *Was ist so gut an Supernatural?*, started on 7. March 2011, last accessed on 1. September 2014, <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/10367/1>>.

—, Forum / TV – Serien – Supernatural, *Wenn Wahrheit und Fiktion miteinander verschwimmen*, posted on 27. June 2012; last accessed on 1. September 2014, <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/16160/1>>.

—, Forum / TV – Serien – Supernatural, *Wie sexistisch ist Supernatural? (und guckt ihr trotzdem weiter?)*, started on 08. January 2009, last accessed on 1. September 2014, <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/1567>>.

Forbes, B.D. & Mahan, J. H. (eds.) 2000, *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, The University of California Press, Berkeley.

Foucault, M. 1994, *Überwachen und Strafen. Die Geburt des Gefängnisses*, Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp.

Gehlen, D.v., 2008, *RapidShare - der unbekannte Web-Star*, published on 16. June 2008; accessed on 1. September 2014, <<http://jetzt.sueddeutsche.de/texte/anzeigen/436859>>.

Hellekson, K. & Busse, K. 2006, 'Introduction. Work In Progress' in K. Hellekson & K. Busse (eds.), *Fan Fiction And Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, McFarland, Jefferson, NC, pp. 5-32.

Henry J., Purushotma R., Weigel M., Clinton K., Robison A. J. 2009, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*, (The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Reports on Digital Media and Learning), The MIT Press, London/Cambridge.

Hills, M. 2000, 'Media Fandom, Neoreligiosity, and (Cult)ural Studies', *The Velvet Light Trap: A Critical Journal of Film and Television*, vo. 2, no. 1, pp. 73-84.

— 2002, *Fan Cultures*. Routledge, London/ New York.

Hjarvard, S. 2006, *The Mediatization of Religion. A Theory of the Media as an Agent of Religious Change*. Paper presented to the 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Media, Religion and Culture (IMRC). 6-9 July 2006, The Sigtuna Foundation, Stockholm/Sigtuna/Uppsala, Sweden.

Hoover, S.M. & Lundby, K. (eds.) 1997, *Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture*. Sage, London/New Delhi.

— 2006, *Religion in the Media Age*, Routledge, London/New York.

Horkheimer, M. & Adorno T. 1973, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. philosophische Fragmente*, Fischer-Taschenbuch-Verlag, Frankfurt/Main.

HunterBabe1989 2009, *Fan fiction. Supernatural - When God is Gone and the Devil Takes Hold (Ep.12; Season 5/ Season 9)*, first created on 03. September 2009, last edited on 21. May 2014, last accessed on 1. September 2014,

<<http://www.fanfiktion.de/s/4aa0376d00004cbc06514438/1/Supernatural-When-God-is-Gone-and-the-Devil-Takes-Hold-Ep-12-Season-5-Season-9->>.

Jenkins, H. 2013, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Routledge, New York.

Jester, A. 2011, *Supernatural Fans Outside The US - I Need Your Help!*, published on 6. October 2011; last accessed on 1. September 2014.

<<http://www.thewinchesterfamilybusiness.com/index.php/news/27-news-and-announcements/16511-supernatural-fans-outside-the-us-i-need-your-help>>.

Kaveney, R. 2010, 'Gen, Slash, OT3s, and Crossover. The Varieties of Fan Fiction', in: S.Abbott (ed.), *The Cult TV Book*, I.B. Tauris, New York/ London, pp. 243-247.

MissFreeWill 2013, *just one change*, last edited 5. May 2013, last accessed on 1. September 2014, <<http://www.myfanfiction.de/texte/supernatural/just-one-change.244364.html>>.

Myfanfiction.de, Category: Supernatural, Fan Fictions, last accessed on 1. September 2014, <<http://www.myfanfiction.de/texte/supernatural>>.

—, *Supernatural, Glaubst ihr an all das?*, started on 23. January 2008, last accessed on 1. September 2014, <<http://www.myfanfiction.de/gruppen.php?gruppenid=350&themaId=906>>.

Ong, A.: 1999, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* Duke University Press, Durham, NC.

Partridge, C. 2004, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture 1*, T&T Clark International, London/New York.

Peirce, C.S. 1998, *The Essential Peirce. Selected Philosophical Writings*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN.

Petersen, L.N. 2013, 'Danish female fans negotiating romance and spirituality in The Twilight Saga', in M. Lövheims (ed.), *Media, Religion and Gender. Key Issues and New Challenges*, Routledge, New York, pp. 82-95.

Porter, J. 2009, 'Implicit Religion In Popular Culture: The Religious Dimensions of Fan Communities', in *Implicit Religion* vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 271-280.

Tunstall, J. 1997, *The Media Are American: Anglo-American media in the world*, Constable, London.

— 2006, *The Media Were American: U.S. mass media in decline*, Oxford University Press, London.

Weber, S. & Dixon, S. (eds.) 2007, *Growing up online. Young People and Digital Technology*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

Wiki.Inc. 2014, *About us*, last accessed on 1. September 2014, <<http://www.wikia.com/Wikia>>.

## Biography

LISA KIENZL is a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer at the University of Graz, Austria. She studied Cultural Anthropology and Religious Studies at the University of Graz, the Roskilde University, Denmark, and the University at Buffalo, NY. Her research interests include the transformation of religion in contemporary western societies, the mediatization of religion and gender as well as nationalism, identity and transculturalism in television narratives.

Lisa Kienzl  
Institute for Religious Studies  
University of Graz  
[lisa.kienzl@uni-graz.at](mailto:lisa.kienzl@uni-graz.at)

# 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 <sup>1</sup>**

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](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’.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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).

## Bibliography

Baraniuk, Chris ‘The Pirate and the Priest: How Digital Turned into Divine’ *The Machine Starts: How Information Technology is Changing Humanity Bit by Bit*.

<http://www.themachinestarts.com/read/2012-01-the-pirate-and-the-priest-how-digital-turned-into-divine> (accessed October 2014).

Cox, Richard J. ‘Testing the Spirit of the Information Age’ *Journal of Information Ethics*, (McFarland and Company Inc Publishers, Jefferson, North Carolina, USA) Fall 2001, pp51-66.

Davis, Erik *Techgnosis* (Three Rivers Press, New York, 1998).

Elliott-Binns, L.E. *English Thought 1860-1900: The Theological Aspect*, (London; New York: Longmans Green, 1956).

George, Alison ‘The World’s Newest Religion Explained’ *New Scientist* January 6th 2012.

<http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn21334-kopimism-the-worlds-newest-religion-explained.html> (accessed October 2014).

Grieve, Gregory P. ‘Religion’ in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* Ed. Heidi Campbell (Routledge, London and New York, 2013) pp. 104-118.

Hogan, Bernie and Wellman, Barry ‘The Immanent Internet Redux’ in *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture* Ed Cheong, Fischer-Nielsen, Gelfgren and Ess (Peter Lang, New York 2012) pp. 43-62.

Kripal, Jeff *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (University of Chicago Press, 2011).

Partridge, Christopher *The Re-enchantment of the West Vol 1 Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture* ( T &T Clark, London, 2005).

Partridge, Christopher *The Re-enchantment of the West Vol 2 Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture* (T & T Clark, London, 2005).

Possamai, Adam 'Yoda Goes to Glastonbury: An Introduction to Hyper-Real Religions' in *Handbook of Hyper-Real Religions* Ed. Possamai, Adam (Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2012) pp.1-21.

Romig, Rollo 'The First Church of Pirate Bay' *The New Yorker Magazine* January 12th 2012 <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/culture/2012/01/the-missionary-church-of-kopimism.html> (accessed October 2014).

Tagliabue, John 'In Sweden, Taking File Sharing to Heart. And to Church.' *New York Times*, July 25th 2012 <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/26/world/europe/in-sweden-taking-file-sharing-to-heart-and-to-church.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed October 2014).

## Websites

The Church of Kopimism in Canada, <http://kopimistsamfundet.ca/> (accessed October 2014).

The Church of Kopimism in Sweden, <http://kopimistsamfundet.se/english/> (accessed October 2014).

The Swedish Piratpartiet (Pirate Party), <http://english.piratpartiet.se/principles/> (accessed October 2014).

Kopimist Wedding Ceremony, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRMPcFexWlk> (accessed October 2014).

**Biography**

SEAN O'CALLAGHAN is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Religious and Theological Studies at Salve Regina University, Newport, Rhode island, USA. He is the author of *The Compact Guide to World Religions*, published by Lion Hudson, UK in 2010. His research interests include world religions, particularly Islam, new religious movements, millennial movements, religion and technology, Transhumanism, emerging technologies and warfare, violent religious movements and religious movements in cyberspace.

Dr. Sean O'Callaghan  
Dept of Religious and Theological Studies  
Salve Regina University  
100 Ochre Point Ave  
Newport, Rhode Island 02840  
USA



# **Trans-European Adaptations in the Diamond Way: Negotiating Public Opinions on Homosexuality in Russia and in the U.K.**

B. Scherer

## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on a Neo-Orthodox Tibetan Buddhist movement's shifting trans-European positioning on the web and in its media self-representation with regard to public discourses around homosexuality. The analysis presented also proves methodologically relevant, exemplifying through reflexive ethnography how outsider/insider scholars can manoeuvre religious politics.

As a global movement of the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, the Diamond Way of the Danish lay teacher Ole Nydahl has been particularly successful in its proselytising efforts throughout Eastern and Central Europe. Previous research has noted the selectively socially conservative and mildly homophobic tendencies of the Diamond Way (Scherer 2011; 2013).

In the trans-European context, from Russia to the U.K., Nydahls and the movement's mild homophobia/strained LGBT-neutrality appears to draw public criticism for either being too pro-LGBT or too anti-LGBT. The investigation highlights the shifting public perceptions and socio-religious political frontlines in Russia and the U.K. and reveals a pattern of opportunism and (non-)negotiating public opinions.

## **Keywords**

Tibetan Buddhism, Diamond Way, Buddhism in Europe, Trans-national Buddhism, Buddhism and Homosexuality, Buddhism in Russia, Buddhism in the U.K., Insider/outsider and double exclusion (ethnographic methodology).

## **1 Introduction**

This paper presents comparative case studies of (non-)negotiating public discourses and online presences in a New Religious (Buddhist) movement, the somewhat controversial Diamond

Way, a contemporary convert and now second/third generation movement of the Tibetan Karma Kagyu (bKa' brgyud) school, led by Lama Ole Nydahl. I employ methodological pluralism including historical and anthropological ethnography, auto-ethnography, netnography and discourse analysis. The analysis is supplemented by methodological reflections, which necessarily locate the researcher in relation to their subject in aid of ethnographic authenticity and transparency; these considerations prove relevant for the wider field of study and supplement the methodological parameters which I have outlined previously (Scherer 2009) in relation to research on the Diamond Way. The current study builds on my previous analyses of the movement's negotiation of globalization, tradition and modernity (Scherer 2012a); and, in particular, on the Diamond Way's approach towards gender and sexuality/-ies (Scherer 2011). In this context, I have already presented a first case studies of the Diamond Way's usage of the internet and new media in relation to queer Diamond Way followers (Scherer 2013). In the following case studies I want to draw attention to the shifting national discursive contexts of this transnational movement; the challenges they provide; and the solution strategies employed.

Although it is hard to gauge the exact extent of the Diamond Way's following, I had previously estimated the number of its members and sympathisers at approximately 15,000-70,000 (Scherer 2009, pp. 25-26) or approximately 50.000 (Scherer 2013, p. 145) in 600+ groups and centres worldwide. However, taking into consideration the relatively small amount of larger centres and the high frequency of smallest (three to six persons) groups, an estimate of around 25,000 followers and sympathisers in total appears to be more probable. The movement is quite visible in Central and Eastern Europe where it sometimes appears to dominate the regional and national discursive space of Buddhism on the contemporary transnational religious/spiritual marketplace as its web presence indicates (see below Parameter 1). In 2007, the Diamond Way consolidated its continental European presence by establishing its first transnational centre as the headquarters of the movement: the so-called Europe Center, near Immenstadt in the German Alps (<<http://www.europe-center.org>>).

As a New Buddhist movement, the Diamond Way revolves around its founder, the Danish Hippie-turned-Lama (Tibetan Buddhist teacher) Ole Nydahl (born 1941). His spiritual conversion, career and mission is remarkable, particularly because of the identitarian emphasis the movement places on the constant writing and rewriting of Nydahl's (auto-)hagiography, or (rang gi) rnam thar in terms of the Tibetan Buddhist literary genre (Scherer 2014). Nydahl, together with his late wife Hannah (1946-2007), encountered the previous head of the Tibetan Karma Kagyu school, the Sixteenth Karmapa Rangjung Rigpe Dorje (1924-1981) in the late 1960s and early 1970s; Nydahl's life narration subsequently constructs him as the first western student of the Karmapa hierarch (a contestable claim) and as one of the most successful propagators of Tibetan Buddhism in the West/global North in general. It has been noted in previous research (Saalfrank 1997: 224-228;

Scherer 2012a) that the movement can be meaningfully described as neo-orthodox (or better: neo-orthoprax), using Peter Berger's definition of neo-orthodoxy as "the reaffirmation of the objective authority of a religious tradition after a period during which that authority has been relativized and weakened." (Berger 1980: 79): Nydahl is – in social and, selectively, in religious terms – a conservative propagator of Tibetan Buddhism among western lay converts (and now second generation convert Buddhists); his trademarks are a combination of charismatic self-stylisation and grandeur; old boy's charm; and most importantly a superficially modernist hybridisation and packaging of orthodox (or better 'orthoprax') Buddhist content, which at times uneasily masks many traditional pre-modern features and the tendency to inscribe Tibetan Buddhist orthoprax devotion for the teacher into an uncritical personality cult and imitation of the teacher's habitus (Scherer 2011, pp. 94-95). Consequently, Nydahl's charisma, socially conservative political views, and life style have drawn criticism for propagating a "life-style Buddhism." (Ruch 2006); his broad, hyper-social and sometimes hedonistic appearing packaging of Tibetan Buddhism for a mainly privileged following (=white, heterosexual, abled-body/body-normative, young-to-middle aged, middle-classed) earned him the criticism of propagating a sort of "Buddhism light" (see Scherer 2009, pp. 35-38). However, the complexities of Tibetan politics in exile around the Karmapa controversy form the decisive discursive context of much sectarian Nydahl criticism: Nydahl is a stark supporter of the late 14th Shamar Rinpoche's claimant to the title of the 17th Karmapa, i.e. the Karma Kagyu lineageholder, HH Thinley Thaye Dorje. Thaye Dorje counts on the support of approximately half of the Tibetan and a majority of Non-North American Karma Kagyu Buddhists. However, some European and most American Karma Kagyu followers, including many sectarian US-academics, support another claimant selected by the 12th Situpa. In a curious and slightly ironic display of unity, this Karmapa candidate, HH Orgyen Thinley, was accepted by both the Chinese government and the Tibetan government in exile (Scherer 2009, pp. 28-29). A further important contextual factor motivating criticism of Nydahl is constituted by zealous "cult"-watchers who exhibit questionable and rather un-nuanced approaches to New Religious Movements such as ex-cult-deprogrammer Rick Ross and his web blog and forum (formerly using the URL <[www.rickross.com](http://www.rickross.com)>, the blog was recently rebranded as <<http://www.culteducation.com>>); or, in the German speaking context, the conspiracy theorists Victor and Victoria Trimondi (<<http://www.trimondi.de>>)<sup>1</sup> and a few Christian cult watchers (Sektenbeauftragte) and their theological helpers: in their criticism these critics have clearly demonstrated a distinct lack of sufficiently nuanced understanding of Tibetan Buddhism (see Scherer 2011, p. 93)<sup>2</sup>.

---

1 Victor and Victoria Trimondi (pseudonym of Herbert and Mariana Röttgen) understand themselves as investigators of the "dark sides" of Tibetan Buddhism and, more recently, of Buddhist-Fascist conspiracies; for a critical academic evaluation of their key premises and claims see Schlieter 2008.

2 Examples are polemical publications such as Schmid 1998 and Ruch 2006; Chryssides (1999: 342-365) provides a fair overview and critique of counter-cult movements.

## 2 Ethnographic reflexivity: the outsider/insider hermeneutics and an auto-ethnographic disclaimer

(Auto-)Ethnographic reflexivity is a constituent factor in any anthropological or sociological research approach (cp., e.g., Coffey 1999). Consciously or unconsciously biased, partisan and/or questionable scholarship is usually enabled by the lack of transparency of the academic(-cum-stakeholder)'s reflexive locus in the discourse. Writing on Buddhism as a scholar-cum-practitioner, it is tempting to ignore the methodological dilemma known in cultural anthropology as the insider-outsider problem (McCutcheon 1999). The problem can also be construed along the line of the 'Theology' vs. 'Christian Studies' (as a sub-discipline of Religious Studies) divide (cp. Freiburger 2000). Some efforts have been made to explore 'Buddhist Theology' or even 'Dharmology' (Jackson and Makransky 2000). Ruegg (1995) argues for the priority of an emic approach in Buddhist Studies when he states

For my part, I am inclined to think that the approach to the understanding and analysis of our sources must initially be what has been termed "emic" rather than "etic." That is, in the first instance, an effort has to be made, as far as is possible, to determine how the categories and terms of a culture relate to each other structurally and systemically, and so to place ourselves within the cultural contexts and intellectual horizons of the traditions we are studying, making use of their own intellectual and cultural categories and seeking as it were to "think along" with these traditions. This is much more than a matter of simply developing sympathy or empathy, for it is an intellectual, and scientific, undertaking (p. 156).

While Scholars-cum-practitioners dominate the academic discourse in some parts of the world they are also subject to academic suspicion by seemingly more objective 'outsider' scholars (who in turn regularly fail to disclose any personal religious affiliations themselves). As Baumann (1999) summarises,

The self-confessed Buddhist scholar-practitioner seems to be a particularly North American phenomenon. In contrast, most scholars studying Buddhist texts, histories, and social realities in Europe or Australia deliberately avoid admitting publicly that they personally might be Buddhists. One reason for this is the underlying assumption that too close an alignment with the studied object might intrude upon the scholar's so-called "objectivity" and "neutrality." Personal convictions and academic investigation are seen as different spheres which, for scientific creditability, need to remain apart. Having gone beyond such constructed polarities, scholars in the United States and Canada have stepped up and increasingly in recent years have declared quite frankly that they are followers of

some Buddhist, Hindu, Baha'i or other religious tradition. The dichotomy of "insider versus outsider" has been replaced by the blurring of boundaries to "insider and outsider (p. 25).<sup>3</sup>

This "blurring" has become an important (auto-)ethnographic topic in the study of contemporary Buddhism(s). For example, the British scholar-cum-practitioner Henry (2006) has given a lucid rationale of his ethnographic research on Contemporary Buddhism in the U.K.:

It should be noted here that as author I am also a supporter of engaged Buddhist practice, being a practitioner/researcher (not uncommon in the study of Western Buddhism). I therefore present myself as such for the sake of reflexive validity in the work carried out, and in the context of identifying my own position as an insider researcher in adopting support for a style of Buddhist practice that suggests both insider and outsider at a number of different levels. At the level of a practicing Buddhist and as an engaged Buddhist I am obviously an insider. However [...] the multilayered nature of the practitioner/scholar is to be read in the context of, in my own estimation, the "content specific" area of research which, in my own case (and for others), works at varying levels (pp. 5-6).

Moreover, other scholars are making convincing arguments for a supersession of the insider-outsider divide in favour of that very blurring, the view that everybody is a co-participant in the formulation of a narrative about religion (Knott 2005, pp. 245-246). The practitioner-friendly Buddhist Studies of Naropa Institute (now University), founded by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche in Boulder, CO, is an example of the – reflected "blurring of divisions" (Goss 1999, 2000; Midal 2004, pp. 251-258; Bye 2005).

In the past, my own research on the Diamond Way has drawn critical attention by non-academic opponents and followers of Nydahl alike. Additionally, I have occasionally encountered curious double exclusion: being subjected to discriminatory suspicion both in the academic world and in the ethnographic 'field.' In academia this manifested both at my own institution and in parts of the continental European Religious Studies community;<sup>4</sup> in the field, at the end of 2011, despite strong criticism of my person and research by some Nydahl opponents, my academic view on the Diamond Way has let to me being declared not much short of a *persona non grata* within the movement itself.

---

3 For further reflections on the scholar-cum-practitioner issue see Gross (2000) and the essays in part four ("The Scholar's Place in American Buddhist Studies") of Williams & Queen (1999: 157-261).

4 In 2009, a zealous Christian colleague reported me anonymously to my Dean and the central Human Resources department under the allegation that my research on Nydahl would bring the university into disrepute; however, after a formal investigation and after the involvement of the unions, I was completely vindicated; the colleague, however, was never disciplined and I never received an apology. Already in 2005 an Erasmus bilateral between my British and a well-known German university was blocked by the German side. The responsible German professor explained rather conspiringly to his disappointed student that the reason for letting this opportunity drop was my connection with Nydahl (sic!).

Hence, my disclaimer as insider and outsider, as a scholar and a practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism, should be helpful for anyone who wishes to contest or validate the balance of my research outputs; acknowledging Bourdieu's (1992) emphasis on ethnographic reflexivity, the disclosure should make any 'hidden ethnography' transparent, albeit perhaps for the prize of leaving me, the researcher, yet again open to (further) challenge (cf. Blackman 2007, p. 701). In Religious Studies, creating transparency; accounting for ethnographic bias; and challenging the myth of the seemingly completely objective outsider entails most crucially the disclosure of the most pertinent cultural habitus (Bourdieu 1992) - the researcher's own religious affiliation.

Since the late 1990s, I have been fortunate enough to receive many Buddhist teachings and transmissions from prolific Tibetan (Sakya, Nyingma and Kagyu) masters and, most recently, also from Newar Vajrācāryas. My rapport within the field is helped by my personal connection to HH Thinley Thaye Dorje (one of abovementioned claimants to the title of the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa, the Karma Kagyu lineage holder); since 2000, he has been and remains my main Tibetan Buddhist teacher.<sup>5</sup> From Lama Ole Nydahl I have received teachings on Phowa ('pho ba, saṃkrānti, transferring of consciousness) in 2000. Additionally, between 2005 and 2011, on Nydahl's invitation, I have been occasionally teaching myself in Nydahl's centres around the world as a scholar-cum-practitioner. This insider position has furnished me with unprecedented ethnographic access and privileges. As many constructive theologians and 'scholars-cum-practitioner' I have regularly found myself in an ethnographic state of identitarian fluidity between observer-participant, necessarily oscillating between insider and outsider and/or inhabiting hybrid and/or liminal spaces of ethnographic privilege and internal voice and visibility. In this context it is important to acknowledge that scholars of any religious tradition are not static focal points themselves (cf. Tweed 2006, p. 8), but are continuously changing themselves and always and necessarily co-shaping the very discourses they study and analyse. Still, the observer/participant/co-shaper tension and the struggle to maintain authenticity and integrity as both ethnographer and Buddhist thinker & teacher has resulted in my current, slightly eccentric liminal state: I am viewed as a friendly abject in the Diamond Way and a suspected sectarian analyser of a controversial contemporary Buddhist movement in a (now decreasing) part of academia. Perhaps, inimical double exclusion can be an indication of fairly balanced (and thus non-partisan) scholarship?

---

5 As explained above there is a schism in the current Karma Kagyu school about the identity of the 17<sup>th</sup> incarnation of Karmapa hierarch; I refrain from any political judgement about - or disrespect to - the other Karmapa claimant, HH Orgyen Thinley.

### 3 Parameter 1: The Diamond Way online and its media discourses

Media representation is a crucial factor in spiritual self-marketing (see, e.g., Hoover 2006). Just as many other convert Tibetan Buddhist movements, the Diamond Way successfully uses its internet presence for identitarian cohesion, presentation, in-group services, and proselytising. Dedicated web, streaming and social media teams are implementing Nydahl's public relations' efforts. While the transnational movement is represented by the URL <<http://www.diamondway-buddhism.org>>, the Diamond Way has successfully secured generic and national internet presence by obtaining URLs such as <<http://www.buddhism.eu>> (links to <<http://www.diamondway-buddhism.org>>); <<http://www.buddhism.org.uk/>> (U.K.); <<http://www.buddhismus.de>> (Germany); <<http://www.buddhismus.org>> (Switzerland); <<http://www.buddhismus.at>> (Austria); <<http://www.buddhism.it>> (Italy); <<http://www.buddhismus.sk>> (Slovakia); <<http://www.buddyzm.pl>> (Poland); <<http://www.buddhism.ua>> (Ukraine); and <<http://www.buddhism.ru>> (Russia) (all as viewed on 21 July 2014). This current web presence of the movement indicates its claim to represent Buddhism in a much broader sense than only one particular sub-school of Tibetan Buddhism; in that way the Diamond Way's web presentation is more aspirational than factual in terms of hegemonic discourses.

From the very early days of email and the World Wide Web onward, electronic newsletters (DWBN -Diamond Way Buddhism Network; starting 1994 as Karma Kagyu Buddhist Network) have been sent out to followers of Nydahl. Since 2002, Nydahl's teachings around the world are being live-streamed on the web to subscribed members of Diamond Way groups (<<http://www.diamondway-teachings.org/transmission.html>>). A dedicated YouTube channel exists since November 2008, which provides tailor-made teachings of Nydahl on various topics (<<http://www.youtube.com/user/BuddhismDiamondWay>>).

However, the Diamond Way has been rather cautious in the area of social media: in reaction to increasing online criticism of Nydahl and the movement, Diamond Way followers are admonished to be mindful of conducting themselves in a good style on all social media and to prioritise personal contact to other sangha members and the teacher(s). A dedicated, closed Diamond Way social media trial since 2007, <<http://virtualsangha.ning.com>>, has not been very successful (Scherer 2013, pp. 147-150).

#### 4 Parameter 2: The Diamond Way and homosexuality

As mentioned above, in previous research I have analysed gender performance and identity, sexual ethics and sexualities in the Diamond Way (Scherer 2011); I presented further ethnographic evidence in a case study of queer Diamond Way followers (Scherer 2013). On this basis, Nydahl's and the Diamond Way's view on homosexuality can be summarised as follows:

Although the Diamond Way can be classified as a “world-affirming” movement according to Wallis' typology of New Religious Movements (Anderson 1994, p. 152), it is not an easy place for lesbians, gays and bisexuals (and trans\*, intersex, querying and queer subjects). While Nydahl embraces (hetero-)sexual activity as a means to bring happiness to others, clearly minoritising and mildly homophobic attitudes prevail within the movement. This is unsurprising given traditional homo- and transphobic attitudes in Tibetan Buddhism(s) (see Scherer 2011); and given Nydahl's personal hetero-machismo and hyper-masculine gender performance. In his own teachings Nydahl has adapted from openly homophobic in earlier years to his current position of strained neutrality. Essentially Nydahl pleads stunned ignorance on homosexuality when he states “homosexual relationships I cannot fathom” (Nydahl 1996, p. 30).<sup>6</sup> He opines that homosexual relationships are “not advised” in Buddhism since “they seem to bring more suffering, disease and disturbing emotions than normal [sic!] relationships” (Nydahl 2001: 20 tr. Scherer).<sup>7</sup> Still, Nydahl is clearly attempting a certain degree of neutrality when he states that “the Buddha was wise enough to broadly steer clear of our bedrooms” (Nydahl 2008a, tr. Scherer).

I have several bisexual and gay students and I have also blessed several couples for a fulfilling life together. How they have fun with each other in detail, I will better leave to them themselves. They are often gifted people, but their life is not easy. There are strong jealousies, and actually I suspect that same-sex love often strengthens the ego(-illusion) (Nydahl 1997, p. 32, tr. Scherer).<sup>8</sup>

As demonstrated in my earlier research, Nydahl's teachings continue to betray hetero-sexist ignorance (Scherer 2011, 2013).

---

6 A Polish edition appeared the same year in *Diamantowa Droga* 15 (Winter 1996), <[http://diamentowadroga.pl/dd15/milosc\\_i\\_partnerstwo](http://diamentowadroga.pl/dd15/milosc_i_partnerstwo)>, accessed 6 June 2011; the English version was reprinted in *Buddhism today* 14 (2004), 37-40 (quotation on p. 40).

7 “Man empfiehlt sie nicht im Buddhismus. Sie scheinen mehr Leid, Krankheit und Störgefühle auszulösen als normale Verbindungen.” The interview was translated e.g. into Danish for *Buddhisme i dag* 19 (2001), 20-30.

8 Ich habe mehrere bisexuelle und einige schwule Schüler und habe auch mehrere Paare für ein erfüllendes Zusammenleben gesegnet. Wie sie sich so in Einzelheiten miteinander vergnügen, überlasse ich ihnen lieber selbst. Es sind oft begabte Leute, aber ihr Leben ist nicht leicht. Es gibt starke Eifersüchteleien, und eigentlich hege ich den Verdacht, daß Liebe mit seinesgleichen oft egostärkend wirkt.



## 5 Case Study 1: The Diamond Way on homosexuality in Russia

The Diamond Way has developed a strong following in Russia ever since Nydahl started his missionary activities in the Soviet Union in 1988. There are currently a staggering 80+ centres and groups across Russia under the umbrella of the Russian Association of Karma Kagyu Buddhists (Российская Ассоциация Буддистов Школы Карма Кагью, <<http://www.buddhism.ru/onas/almaznyi-put-v-rossii>>), since 2011 Российская Ассоциация Буддистов Алмазного Пути Традиции Карма Кагью (Russian Association of the Diamond Way Karma Kagyu Tradition); this umbrella association is a state recognised ‘pan-Russian traditional religious organisation’ / ‘общероссийская традиционная религиозная организация’. The legal recognition of Buddhism as an indigenous religious tradition in the Russian Federation in 1998 meant that the Diamond Way was able to avoid many difficulties that other Neo-Eastern traditions have been facing in Russia in their missionary attempts.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union the Russian Orthodox Church has become a major political factor in Russia with 74% of the population identifying as members of the church in 2012 (Rees 2013). The Russian Orthodox Church is known for its notorious anti-LGBT stance and the role it played in the introduction of the 2013 anti-gay propaganda laws. In propagating Christian Orthodoxy as Russian National Identity, the Church has also become a fierce defender of the orthodox Christian ‘soul’ of Russia – counter-proselytising and attacking the spread of other Christian denominations and non-Christian religions.

Already in 2000, Gronik, an orthodox anti-cult activist from Sevastopol, attacked the Diamond Way (and more generally all forms of Tantric Buddhism) in a blog as the “Diamond network of Darkness”, i.e. “Алмазные сети тьмы.” The Russian Orthodox Church’s opposition to the Diamond Way has been continuing until today with marginal success; in one fairly recent example, the Kalingrad city council refused a public space to the Diamond Way after a Church-led campaign (Klops.Ru 2012). Still, since the Diamond Way is protected legally as a traditional Russian religion, Orthodox attacks often had to focus on Nydahl himself. Among the first Russian semi-scholarly criticisms of Nydahl ventured in 2002 were his Hippie-style, ‘free love’ (свободной любви) approach to (hetero-)sexuality’ (Balagushkin 2002, pp. 157-158). Soon enough, Russian orthodox counter-cultists followed suit. In 2004, Deacon (Диакон) Mikhail Plotnikov presented a highly polemical report on Nydahl at a conference on “Totalitarian Sects and the democratic state” in Novosibirsk (Plotnikov 2004). In his anti-cult pamphlet, subsequently published online at counter-cult website of the St. Alexander Nevsky cathedral, Novosibirsk (<[www.sektoved.ru](http://www.sektoved.ru)>), Plotnikov tries to demonstrate that the Diamond Way is, indeed, a totalitarian sect; according to him, Nydahl not only propagates ‘free love’ (свободной любви): “He [sc. Nydahl] has also deemed various forms of sexual perversion, including homosexuality, as appropriate for Buddhists

(Различные формы сексуальных извращений, включая гомосексуализм, он также считает приемлемыми для буддиста).” Here, Nydahl – not exactly known for LGBT-inclusion – is depicted as too gay-friendly. The background for this remarkable assertion can be found, indeed, in a moderate opinion on homosexuality by Nydahl in the Russian context, which had been published on the Russian Diamond Way website from mid 2003 until 1 July 2009 (see <[http://web.archive.org/web/20081230172242/http://www.buddhism.ru/teach/ole-love\\_sex.php](http://web.archive.org/web/20081230172242/http://www.buddhism.ru/teach/ole-love_sex.php)>, viewed 21 July 2014). The website featured an interview with Nydahl from 1993 on ‘Love and Sex’ (о любви и сексе) conducted in Siberia (Nydahl 1993) and was published in Polish translation seven years later (Nydahl 1999; very similar to Nydahl 2003: 107-108). In this interview, Nydahl stated:

I myself am heterosexual. We have a couple of gay men and lesbians. At first I thought they were very funny. But after a while I found that our sexual life is not the most important thing in life. It seems that this is one of many factors in our life. If someone does not know anything about a topic, it seems strange to him. There are some of my disciples, who are gay or lesbian, and they have told me how they feel, and I found that only a part of them is different from everyone else, and everything else is the same. In general, the Buddha says that homosexuality comes from the fact that in a past life someone behaved badly towards the opposite sex. And those who complain too much about either men or women in this life can become like this in the next one (tr. Scherer).<sup>9</sup>

This statement is generally neutral although it reproduces some unfounded prejudices not backed by any traditional Buddhist source and attributes them to the Buddha. Nydahl goes on to replicating the offensive stereotyping and rhetoric of the early-AIDS panic:

---

9 Я сам гетеросексуален. У нас есть пара гомосексуалистов и лесбиянок. Сначала мне казалось, что они очень забавны. Но спустя некоторое время я обнаружил, что сексуальная жизнь не является определяющим всего остального в жизни. Похоже, что это один из многих факторов в жизни. Если человек не знает чего-то - ему это кажется странным. Те мои ученики, кто является гомосексуалистом или лесбиянкой, рассказывали мне о том, как они это ощущают, и я обнаружил, что только одна часть их отличается от всех остальных, а все остальное такое же. Вообще, Будда говорит, что это происходит от того, что в прошлой жизни это существо плохо отзывалось о противоположном поле. И те, кто слишком много жалуются на мужчин или женщин в этой жизни, могут получить проблемы в следующей. The Polish version (Nydahl 1999) reads: Sam jestem więcej niż zdecydowanym heteroseksualistą, ale jest wśród nas para homoseksualistów i lesbijek. Na początku wydawało mi się, że są bardzo śmieszni, jednak po pewnym czasie zauważyłem, że życie seksualne nie jest decydującym faktorem w naszym życiu - jest tylko jednym z jego aspektów. Jeśli czegoś nie znamy, wówczas często wydaje nam się to dziwne. Owi homoseksualni uczniowie opowiadali mi o tym, w jaki sposób odbierają świat i swoich partnerów. Wówczas zauważyłem, że tylko jednym aspektem osobowości różnią się od innych ludzi, natomiast cała reszta jest taka sama. Budda mówił, że taka tendencja jest skutkiem złego wyrażania się o przeciwnej płci w poprzednim życiu. Ci więc, którzy zbyt często narzekają na mężczyzn albo na kobiety w tym życiu, mogą mieć problemy w przyszłym.

In addition, I would like to add to this issue [sc. the issue of prostitution], that today we have to be very careful about AIDS. The easy days are gone, and we need to completely avoid anyone who has had contact with Africans or black people; who had contacts with injecting drug-addicts; and with homosexuals (tr. Scherer).<sup>10</sup>

This very interview came to the attention of an orthodox cult watcher in April 2009; it was quoted as evidence for the Diamond Way's 'pro-gay', i.e., in the cult-watcher's reading, pro-'perversion' (извращение) stance. Nydahl's opinion featured in a fierce anti-Nydahl attack on the "Missionary apologetic project 'to the truth'" website (<<http://www.k-istine.ru>>) written by Maxim Stepanenko (Максим Степаненко), the then head of the Missionary Department of the Tomsk archdiocese (Stepanenko 2009).<sup>11</sup> This archiepiscopal anti-cult project had been targeting among others Hare Krishnas, Sahaja Yoga, Seven Day Adventists and Mormons. The context for the attack against Nydahl and the Diamond Way was a Buddhist cultural festival and exhibition in the Tomsk museum, which run from mid-October to mid-November 2008 and which had been co-organised by the Tomsk Diamond Way centre (established 1999; see Malakhat'ko 2011, pp. 56-57); the archdiocese had been vocally protesting against this festival, with Rostislav, Archbishop of Tomsk and Asino, warning his orthodox flock not to participate in the activities of the Diamond Way (Rostislav 2008).

This and similar attacks led to a change of the Russian Diamond Way's web-presentation; the above quoted statement by Nydahl on homosexuality was removed timely after the attack; as of now (21 July 2014), homosexuality is not mentioned on <<http://www.buddhism.ru>> anymore. Sex is mentioned only cursory, and only by reiterating Nydahl's basic condensation of sexual ethics to bringing mutual happiness (Nydahl 2009a) and his expectation that his students to have "a healthy, not frustrated view of sexuality (Nydahl 1998a)" or, in the Russian version, "здоровым, не поврежденным взглядом на сексуальность" (Nydahl 1998b); it is interesting to note that the Russian translation implies damage (повреждение) rather than frustration (разочарование), fitting better into a discourse that constructs perceived sexual deviance as a corruption rather than a mental blockage. At no point in this talk does Nydahl elaborate what a healthy view of sexuality entails.

---

10 Кроме того, я хочу добавить к этому вопросу, что сегодня нужно быть очень осторожными со СПИДом. Легкие дни прошли, и нужно совершенно избегать любого, кто имел контакт с африканцами, с черными людьми; кто имел контакты с наркоманами, которые занимаются уколами, и гомосексуалистов). The Polish text reads: Chciałbym też powtórzyć jeszcze raz to, co już powiedziałem wcześniej - dzisiaj trzeba bardzo uważać na AIDS. Bez troskie czasy minęły i trzeba naprawdę unikać tych partnerów, którzy mieli kontakty z Afrykanami, narkomanami biorącymi narkotyki dożylnie i homoseksualistami.

11 After Stepanenko made similarly zealous, yet apparently more controversial comments on single-motherhood, Archbishop Rostislav relieved Stepanenko from his position was relieved of his duties on 24 December 2013 (*Interfax* 2013).

Corroborating these findings, Nydahl's teachings in Russian translations available in printed form provide a rich archive for the negotiating of public discourses and the national adaption of this transnational movement in Russia. Among Nydahl's books in Russian language are two large volumes of Question-and-Answer-books, compiled from lectures in Russia between 1997-2000 (Nydahl 2008b) and 2004-2008 (Nydahl 2009b). Appealing (un-ironically?) to Russian national sentiment, the thick-paged tomes are entitled 'The Profundity of the Slavonic Mind.' Both volumes contain numerous questions on love and relationship issues, such as 'what can I do when I am in love with a married man?' (2009b, p. 216-17) to 'I am always horny? What can I do?' (p. 213).<sup>12</sup> Only one singular question in each volume deals with homosexuality. The books are interesting in this contexts, as they show already a slight change of tone in the attitude towards homosexuality between 1999 and 2005 (i.e. the time before the Stepanenko attack), which might reflect the increasing need to negotiate Russian public opinion.

The singular statement in Vol. 1 reproduces the question of a Russian student to Nydahl at the Phowa (conscious dying meditation) course in Novosibirsk, August 1999: "Ole, I'm gay. What is the reason of this phenomenon? What can I do using this state, for the good of other beings?" (Nydahl 2008b, p. 283; tr. Scherer).<sup>13</sup> Nydahl's answer can be read as attempting a compassionate advice to a gay student:

Well, if you are looking for a partner, we have a group in Germany, where women gravitate towards women and men towards men. If you do not have a partner and you feel lonely, you could find a partner there! The reason for this [sc. homosexuality] is the aversion to the opposite sex. For example, if in this life I'm always going to complain about women, then I block my own openness to women. Then maybe in my next life I'll hold hands with another man - and the other way around. That means, if we do not like the opposite sex, then we seek out our own sex. That is the Buddha's explanation. It can also change during the course of one life. [p. 284] If you want my opinion on this matter, I do not think that it is something terribly important. I do not think that sexual orientation is a decisive factor in one's life. This is just one of many factors that make up the human personality. If people do not feel bad and do not cause anybody harm, I wouldn't give it much thought. Of course, if people suffer, they should get help, but otherwise - let them live their lives. If they are adults, if they are not chasing kids, and so on, then, in my opinion, it is none of my business. (Nydahl 2008b, pp. 283-284; tr. Scherer)<sup>14</sup>

12 In his answer Nydahl jokes, the student should open a single-ladies-club before he continues (jokingly?) with biological gender stereotyping, saying that men want sex under 30, women after 30 – hence the young man asking should look for women over 30.

13 Оле, я гомосексуалист. В чем причина этого явления? Что я могу сделать, используя это состояние, для блага других существ?

14 Что ж, если вы ищете партнера, то у нас есть группы в Германии, где женщины тяготеют к женщинам, а мужчины - к мужчинам. Если у вас здесь нет партнера и вы чувствуете себя одиноко, вы могли бы найти партнера там. Причиной этого считается неприязнь к противоположному полу. Например, если в этой жизни

This answer is clearly intended as neutral and supportive, yet it remains offensive and problematic by its pathologisation of homosexuality and the mentioning of ‘child-chasing’ which constitutes the homophobic standard conflation of paedophilia with homosexuality etc.

The answer in the second volume, posted in March 2005, at a course focussing on the life and teachings of the Tibetan Kagyu founding father Marpa Lotsawa (lo tsā ba, ‘The Translator’, 1012-1097) in Uljanovsk, is shorter yet:

I have no experience with same-sex relationships. But I have observed other people and I can give some advice. In any non-traditional relationship the emotions tend to be stronger, especially jealousy and pride. This may be the result of pressure from the outside world or due to the extreme inclinational nature of such people. When I was younger, I thought that sexual orientation is the most important factor in the formation of the character. But I don’t think so anymore. It is just one of many factors. Intimate life should be a personal matter. For Russians, by the way, this area is much more personal than in many other countries. In this regard, you have a good style. You do not pay too much attention to the rumours; this gives you the chance to focus on more important things. (Nydahl 2009b, 216; tr. Scherer)<sup>15</sup>

Although still exhibiting strained neutrality, the answer remarkably makes a reference to the allegedly ‘Russian’ sentiment of privacy to oppose gay visibility. So, in other words, it’s more or less alright to be gay in the Diamond Way, but do not talk too much about it as not to draw too much criticism: a Diamond Way variation of a Don’t Ask Don’t Tell-policy.

From the discussion above, it has become clear that Nydahl and Diamond Way are navigating the Russian public discourse and opinions on homosexuality by including dominant homophobic sentiments regarding its pathology and its cognateness to paedophilia (1999); by appealing to

---

я всё время буду жаловаться на женщин, то я заблокирую свою собственную открытость к женщинам. Тогда возможна, что я буду держаться за ручку с женщиной в своей следующей жизни. И наоборот. То есть если мы не любим противоположный пол, то нас отбрасывает к нашему собственному полу. Такие объяснения дает Будда. Это также может меняться в ходе жизни. [р. 284] Если вы хотите знать мое мнение по этому поводу, то я не считаю это чем-то ужасно важным. Я не думаю, что сексуальная ориентация является решающим фактором в жизни. Это лишь один из многих факторов, составляющих человеческую личность. Если люди не чувствуют себя плохо и не причиняют никому вреда, то меня это мало интересует. Конечно, если они страдают, то они должны получить помощь, а иначе - пусть живут своей жизнью. Если они взрослые люди, не гонятся за детьми, и так далее, то, по-моему, это не мое дело.

- 15 У меня нет опыта однополых взаимоотношений. но я наблюдал за другими и могу дать кое-какие советы. В любых нетрадиционных отношениях мешающие чувства обычно сильнее, особенно ревность и гордость. Это может быть следствием давления со стороны окружающего мира или экстремальных наклонностей характера таких людей. Когда я был моложе, я считал, что сексуальная ориентация является самым главным фактором формирования характера. Но теперь я так не думаю. Это всего лишь один из очень многих факторов. Интимная жизнь должна быть личным делом. У россиян, кстати, эта область остается намного более личной, чем во многих других странах. У вас в этом плане хороший стиль. Вы не слишком обращаете внимание на слухи, что дает шанс сосредоточиться на более важных вещах.

Russian cultural sentiment of personal space and tacitness (2005); and then by reacting possibly hyper-vigilantly and - to a degree – opportunistically to outside pressure, by eliminating any expressions of (still mildly homophobic and strained) ‘neutral’ statements on homosexuality from its publicly accessible Russian language web presence (2009).

## 6 Case Study 2: The Diamond Way on homosexuality in the UK

The negotiation of the public discourse can be contrasted with a recent organizational and public relations’ issue in the United Kingdom, which pertains to the purchase of a property in Vauxhall/Lambeth (London) for purpose of creating a new Diamond Way UK headquarter and London centre.

In the U.K., the Diamond Way is a rather marginal group in the Tibetan Buddhist landscape which is being slightly dominated by the New Kadampa (Kay 2004, pp. 35-116; Bluck 2006, 129-151); additionally, there is a significant presence of Karma Kagyu groups and centres aligned with Samyé Ling in Scotland, the first Karma Kagyu centre in Europe (Bluck 2006, pp. 110-128). These Karma Kagyu groups oppose the Diamond Way’s alignment with Thaye Dorje as the 17th Karmapa after the split in the Karma Kagyu community about the Karmapa controversy in the 1990s<sup>16</sup>. Diamond Way Buddhism U.K. (DWBUK, <<http://www.dwbuk.org/>>, linking to <<http://www.buddhism.org.uk/>>) as of July 2014 has four centres (Brighton, Exeter, Liverpool and London) and 14 groups, mainly in the south of England. The Diamond Way in the UK is represented by a charity (registered with the Charity Commission for England and Wales under charity number 1093406) that had been fundraising money for a new London centre since the mid-2000s. In 2011, the Beaufoy Institute in Lambeth was identified as a suitable object; the DWBUK charity bid to purchase this grade-two listed historic building, and subsequently applied to gain the planning permission, on which the sale was conditioned. Within the metropolitan religious landscape, the location of the prospect new DWBUK headquarters in South central London meant that three (rival) Tibetan Buddhist centres would be situated in close vicinity: only one km to the east, in Kennington, is the Gelugpa-affiliated Jamyang Buddhist Centre <<http://www.jamyang.co.uk/>>), the main centre of the Dalai Lama-supporting Gelugpa groups in the UK, founded in 1980 by the late Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa and connected to their Foundation for the Preservation of Mahāyāna Tradition (FPMT), from which the New Kadampa tradition of Geshe Kelsang Gyatso split (Bluck 2006, pp. 129-133); a 500 meters further to the east, in Walworth,

---

16 To my knowledge, the only other Karma Kagyu group active in the UK supporting Thaye Dorje as the Karmapa is the Dechen Community of the Sakya-Kagyü ‘ngakpa’ or non-monastic tantric master, Lama Jampa Thaye (<<http://www.dechen.org/>>).

stands the manor place dependence of Kagyu Samyé Dzong, the London headquarter of the rival Karma Kagyu groups affiliated with Samyé Ling, which itself lies a further kilometre to the east in Bermondsey (<<http://www.london.samye.org>>). In the past, Samyé Ling had vocally lobbied against the rival Kagyu groups affiliated with Thaye Dorje; for instance, at the visit of Thaye Dorje in London in August 2005, senior Samyé Ling officials and scores of Samyé Ling followers put pressure on the Anglican Bishop of London, not to meet Thaye Dorje at an inter-faith event (Petre 2005). In personal communications (December 2011), some DWBUK London members stated their expectations that Samyé Ling will forcibly oppose the establishment of the new London Centre.

The process of acquiring of, and gaining planning permission for, the Beaufoy Institute was indeed accompanied by vocal protests; the focus of this opposition was concentrated on Nydahl as a person and included accusations of islamophobia; racism; and sexual relations with students<sup>17</sup> as reported in the Lambeth Weekender (Welford 2012). While homophobia was not prominently among the accusations, the issue was nevertheless raised during the consultation period by concerned citizens in email list posts. These posts, which I have been given access to, refer to the abovementioned news article (Welford 2012) and further make an explicit reference to my article ‘Macho Buddhism’ (Scherer 2011) regarding Nydahl and homosexuality. Contextually, the posts make clear that being branded as homophobic in the UK and in particular in metropolitan London is clearly unhelpful to gaining planning permission in the light of the public and, more pertinently, the policy discourse regarding LGBT inclusion in the UK, such as the Equality Act 2010: this piece of legislation explicitly bans any discrimination based on sexual orientation in the provision of goods and services (<<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>>). Since my research was cited, the representatives of the Diamond Way London approached me for a statement as too neutralise the feared effect of my scholarly article. This was curious, since, as mentioned above, my scholarship had only four months before prompted the transnational Diamond Way to rescind my ethnographic privileges, rendering me little short of a persona non grata in the Diamond Way centres. Reflecting auto-ethnographically on this situation, I note that I felt a deep sense of irony and bafflement; and the need to weigh my conflicting feelings (the insider voice if you want) against my claim to provide balanced evaluations of a multi-layered issue in regional religious politics (the outsider voice).

---

17 It is beyond the scope of this article to analyse these frequent accusations against Nydahl; the islamophobia and racism criticism deserve a separate academic treatment; for initial evaluations and comments see Scherer 2009, p. 35; 2014, pp. 97 & 100; and 2013, 149; on the accusation of sexual relationships with students see Scherer 2011, pp. 89-91.

As a result of this reflexive process, on 11 April 2012, I did indeed send a statement aiming to clarify my view on homophobia within the Diamond Way and its relation to (and irrelevance for) the purchase of the Beaufoy:

It has come to my attention that parts of my research on the Diamond Way movement of the Danish Karma Kagyu teacher, Lama Ole Nydahl, are cited in a non-academic context and used to oppose the establishment of a Diamond Way centre in London. [...] Tibetan Buddhist schools and teachers (including the Dalai Lama) struggle with the traditional homophobic attitudes in Tibet. It is not surprising that Nydahl and the DW need to negotiate traditional teachings with contemporary equality and Human Rights discourses. [...]

If my article is used to oppose the establishment of a Buddhist centre then the same logic will need to lead to opposing the establishment of virtually any Tibetan Buddhist centre [...] This is, of course, absurd. [...] My article therefore needs to be read as a piece of academic criticism by a contemporary Buddhist thinker (Scherer 2012b).

Following on, a discussion between critical voices within the consultation process, the Diamond Way, and the responsible councillor ensued. On 17 April 2012, the critical blogger and Social Justice commentator Sean Creighton (<<http://historyandsocialaction.blogspot.co.uk/>>) published the result of these talks (Creighton 2012); in the statement quoted there, the DWBUK addresses the main criticisms of racism, islamophobia, and homophobia in this way:

Whoever comes to a Diamond Way Buddhist centre is welcome no matter what their personal background, ethnicity or sexuality, or views are as long as they have good social behaviour and of course respect all laws and local regulations and the right of others to adhere to other branches of Buddhism and other religions. (DWBUK, cited in Creighton 2012; emphasis in the original)

In the same post, Councillor Steve Morgan is quoted as praising the Diamond Way for its “willingness to join the Camden LGBT Advice and Safety Project.” (Creighton 2012). Clearly the homophobia issue was being put to rest.

Homophobia related protests did not appear to play any further role by the purchase opponents who included an action group called ‘Lambeth against Racism and Islamophobia’; in the final public hearing, the protests concentrated forcefully on Nydahl’s Islam criticism. The DWBUK were able to deflect these criticisms by presenting Nydahl as just one of the Senior Diamond Way teachers, who has made the undisputed critical remarks in a private, not official capacity (Lambeth Planning Applications Committee 2012, point 14.13 [p. 32]).



The Lambeth Planning Applications Committee granted planning permission on 10 July 2012 concluding

... [I]t is acknowledged that Mr Nydahl appears to hold some critical views. However on balance there is no evidence to demonstrate that these views are integral to the wider organisation or that the former Beaufoy Institute will be used for teachings which have an anti Islamic or racist agenda. (Lambeth Planning Applications Committee 2012, point 14.17 [p. 33])

The decision was critically received by a few media outlets including the South London Press (Morgan 2012) and Islamophobia Watch (Pitt 2012). Some Diamond Way members opined informally that the attack on the new centre was orchestrated by Samyé Ling, supporting the other Karmapa candidate; the conflict was interpreted as not really being about Nydahl and his controversial views but rather as an expression of exile-Tibetan religious politics.

## 7 Conclusion

The case studies presented demonstrate an interesting reactive negotiating of public opinions on homosexuality on the part of regional branches of the Diamond Way; the analysis proved also methodologically relevant, showcasing how outsider/insider (and outsider-ed insider) scholars can (or are forced to) manoeuvre religious politics; and it exemplifies one particular navigation of the aimed for ethnographic authenticity in face of the liminal or blurred researcher's subjectivity.

In Russia, the Diamond Way reacts to public discourse and opinions on homosexuality by adapting their web-presence and appealing opportunistically to national sentiments in order to prevent being seen as too pro-LGBT.

In the UK case, the Diamond Way movement has regionally reacted to the public opinion about homophobic discrimination by showing great effort to appear as LGBT-inclusive and friendly: its negotiating of public opinion included approaching a critical academic for a clarifying statement and issuing statements of LGBT-inclusion and the prospects of participation in LGBT outreach. However, the DWBUK only reacted (to a certain extent) opportunistically to concrete criticisms ventured during a public-legal consultation. It can be noted that the DWBUK is far from publicising itself as LGBT friendly, although, following the above-analysed PR situation around the Beaufoy, the Holborn London Diamond Way Buddhist Centre did, indeed, feature, albeit briefly, as a C.L.A.S.P. – Camden LGBT Advice and Safety Project – partner (Camden LGBT Forum 2012, p. 35). Negotiating public discourses has in this instance clearly meant a side skirmish in a larger

and much more substantial PR battle about successfully negotiating spatial and community acceptance.

It has become clear that Nydahl himself is generally acting clumsily homo-neutral betraying the mildly homophobic and hetero-patriarchal ignorance of his upbringing and of the transnational, traditional Tibetan Buddhist environment. As seen from the case studies, the regional Diamond Way organisations appear to react opportunistically to public opinions, by either avoiding being seen as pro-gay (Russia) or as anti-gay (UK).

## Bibliography

Anderson, JH 1994, 'Tibetansk Buddhisme i Danmark' Chaos: Dansk-Norsk Tidsskrift for Religionshistoriske Studier 20, pp. 138-154.

Balagushkin, EG (Балагушкин ЕГ) 2002, Нетрадиционные религии в современной России: Морфологический анализ, ИФ РАН, Москва (Non-traditional Religions in Modern Russia: A Morphological Analysis, IF RAN, Moscow).

Baumann, M 1999, 'Review of Hayes, RP 1998, Land of No Buddha: Reflections of a Sceptical Buddhist, Windhorse, Birmingham', Journal of Buddhist Ethics 6, pp. 25-28, viewed 21 July 2014, <<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/files/2010/04/baumann991.pdf>>.

Berger, P 1980, The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation, Anchor Press, New York.

Blackman, S 2007, '“Hidden Ethnography”: Crossing Emotional Borders in Qualitative Accounts of Young People's Lives,' Sociology 41.4, pp. 699-716.

Bluck, R 2006, British Buddhism, Routledge, London.

Bourdieu, P 1992, 'The Practice of Reflexive Sociology (The Paris Workshop),' in P Bourdieu & LJD Wacquant (eds), An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp. 217-260.

Bye, R 2005, 'The Founding Mission of Naropa University: “Let East Meet West and the Sparks Will Fly”' in F Midal (ed.), Recalling Chögyam Trungpa, Shambhala, Boston, pp. 143-162.

Camden LGBT Forum 2012, LBGT? Welcome to Camden, C.L.A.S.P. - Camden LGBT Advice and Safety Project pamphlet, London.

Chryssides, GD 1999, Exploring New Religions, Continuum, London.

Coffey, A 1999, *The Ethnographic Self: Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity*. Sage, London.

Creighton, S 2012, DWP and Beaufoy – Final word, weblog post, 17 April 2012, viewed 22 July 2014, <<http://historyandsocialaction.blogspot.co.uk/2012/04/dwp-and-beaufoy-final-word.html>>.

Freiberger, O 2000, 'Ist Wertung Theologie? Beobachtungen zur Unterscheidung von Religionswissenschaft und Theologie' in G Löhr (ed.) 2000, *Die Identität der Religionswissenschaft: Beiträge zum Verständnis einer unbekannteren Disziplin*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt/M., pp. 97–121.

Gronik, O (Гроник, О) 2000, Алмазные сети тьмы (The Diamond Network of Darkness), weblog post, 23 June 2000, viewed 21 July 2014, <<http://stolica.narod.ru/statyi/001.html>>.

Goss, RE 1999, 'Buddhist Studies at Naropa: Sectarian or Academic?' in DR Williams & CS Queen (eds), *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*. Routledge, London, pp. 215-237.

— 2000, 'Naropa Institute: The Engaged Academy' in CS Queen (ed.), *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, Wisdom, Boston, pp. 328-346.

Gross, RM 2000, *Soaring and Settling: Buddhist Perspectives on Contemporary Social and Religious Issues*, Continuum, New York.

Henry, P 2006, 'The Sociological Implications for Contemporary Buddhism in the UK: Socially Engaged Buddhism, a Case Study', *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 13, pp. 1-43, viewed 21 July 2014, <<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/files/2010/04/henry-article.pdf>>.

Interfax 2013, 'Official of Russian Orthodox Church Tomsk diocese loses post over single mothers remarks', 24 December 2013, viewed 21 July 2014, <<http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=10987>>.

Hoover, SM 2006, *Religion in the Media Age*, New York, Routledge.

Jackson, RR & Makransky, J (eds) 2000, *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, Curzon, London.

Kay, DN 2004, *Tibetan and Zen Buddhism in Britain: Transplantation, Development, and Adaption*, Routledge, London.

Klops.Ru (Клопс.Ру) 2012, 'Депутаты отказались отдавать помещение "Буддийскому центру Алмазного пути"' (Deputies Refused to Give Location to the "Diamond Way Buddhist Centre"), 24 October 2012, viewed 21 July 2014, <<http://klops.ru/news/obschestvo/60821-deputaty-otkazalis-otdavati-pomeschenie-quot-buddiyskomu-tsentru-almaznogo-puti-quot>>.

Knott, K 2005, 'Insider/Outsider Perspectives' in JR Hinnells (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, Routledge, London, pp. 243-258.

Lambeth Planning Applications Committee 2012, Case Number: 12/01101/RG4 & 12/01104/LB, 10 July 2012, viewed 22 July 2014,

<<http://www.lambeth.gov.uk/moderngov/documents/s44933/39%20Black%20Prince%20Road%20-%202012%2001101%20RG4%20F.pdf>>.

Malakhat'ko, UV (Малахат'ко, УВ) 2011, 'Новые религиозные движения в Томске' (New Religious Movements in Tomsk), Вестник Томского государственного университета (Bulletin of the Tomsk State University) 348, pp. 55-58.

McCutcheon, RT (ed.) 1999, *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader*, Cassell, New York.

Midal, F 2004, *Chögyam Trungpa: His Life and Teachings*, Shambhala, Boston.

Morgan, B 2012, 'Anger at Go-ahead for Buddhist centre', South London Post, 10 July, viewed 22 July 2014, <<http://www.slp.co.uk/news.cfm?id=24071&y=2012&searchword=Buddhist>>.

Nydahl, O 1993, о любви и сексе (On Love and Sex). Interview by Grisha Serebriano and Vadim Mienszycha, on the trans-Siberian train between Irkutsk and Krasnoyarsk, viewed 24 October 2008, <[http://www.buddhism.ru/teach/ole-love\\_sex.php](http://www.buddhism.ru/teach/ole-love_sex.php)>.

— 1996, 'Love & Partnership', *Buddhism Today* 1, pp. 26-30.

— 1997, 'Der heiße Thron', *Kagyü Life* 23, pp. 21-39.

— 1998a, 'Meditation in Diamond Way Buddhism', *Buddhism Today* 5, viewed at 21 July 2014, <<http://www.futureofbuddhism.com/budlamateach.htm>>.

— 1998b, 'Медитация в Алмазном пути (Ваджраяне)' [Meditation in the Diamond Way (Vajrayana), Russian translation of Nydahl 1998a], viewed at 21 July 2014, <<http://www.buddhism.ru/meditatsiya-v-almaznom-puti-vadzhrayane-lama-ole-nidal/>>.

— 1999, 'Dakini to żeńska zasada oświecenia (The Dakini is the Female Principle of Enlightenment)', tr. W. Tracewski, *Diamentowa Droga* 23 (Autumn 1999), viewed 21 July 2014, <[http://diamentowadroga.pl/dd23/dakini\\_to\\_zenska\\_zasada\\_oswiecenia](http://diamentowadroga.pl/dd23/dakini_to_zenska_zasada_oswiecenia)>, (Polish version of Nydahl 1993).

— 2001, 'Ein Interview mit Lama Ole Nydahl', *Fragen von M Zemlicka, Buddhismus Heute* 32 (2001), 14-23.

— 2003, *Bungee mądrości: Buddyzm Diamentowej Drogi w pytaniach i odpowiedziach (Bungee of Wisdom [sic!]: Diamond Way Buddhism in questions and answers)*, Gdąnsk: Czerwony Słoń,

— 2008a, 'Was sagt der Buddhismus zu Homosexualität', *Fragen an den Lama*, Blog archive, 19 March 2008, viewed 21 July 2014, <<http://www.lama-ole-nydahl.de/fragen/?p=163>>.

— 2008b, Глубина славянского ума: Буддизм в вопросах и ответах, Встречи с Ламой Оле Нидалом 1997-2000, Диалог Пресс, Киев (The Profundity of Slavic Mind: Buddhism in Questions and Answers. Encounters with Lama Ole Nydahl 1997-2000 [Vol. 1], Dialog Press, Kiev).

— 2009, ‘Буддизм начинается с ответственности (Buddhism starts with Responsibility)’, Excerpts from a Talk Given in Riga, Latvia, October, viewed 21 July 2014, <<http://www.buddhism.ru/buddizm-nachinaetsya-s-otvetstvennosti/>>.

— 2009b, Глубина славянского ума: Буддизм в вопросах и ответах, Том II, Алмазный Путь, Москва (The Profundity of Slavic Mind: Buddhism in Questions and Answers, Vol. 2, Diamond Way, Moscow).

Petre, J 2005, ‘Bishop Caught in Battle over Living Buddha’, The Telegraph 9 August, viewed 22 July 2014, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1495801/Bishop-caught-in-battle-over-living-Buddha.html>>.

Pitt, B 2012, Islamophobic Buddhist Sect Gets Planning Permission for Meditation Centre in Lambeth, Islamophobia Watch, weblog post, 12 July 2012, viewed 22 July 2014, <<http://www.islamophobia-watch.com/islamophobia-watch/2012/7/12/islamophobic-buddhist-sect-gets-planning-permission-for-medi.html>>.

Plotnikov, M (Плотников, М) 2004, ‘Необуддийская миссия ламы Оле Нидала (The Neo-Buddhist Mission of Lama Ole Nydahl)’, Report presented at the conference Тоталитарные секты и демократическое государство (Totalitarian Sects and the democratic state), Novosibirsk, Russia, 9 - 11 November 2004, viewed 21 July 2014, <[http://www.sektoved.ru/enciclopedia.php?art\\_id=41](http://www.sektoved.ru/enciclopedia.php?art_id=41)>.

Rostislav, Archbishop of Tomsk and Asino (Ростислав, Архиепископ Томский и Асиновский) 2008, ‘Обращение Томской епархии по поводу проведения “Фестиваля буддийской культуры в Томске”, организованного необуддийской сектой Оле Нидала (Warning of the Archdiocese Tomsk about the Staging of a “Festival of Buddhist Culture in Tomsk” Organised by Ole Nydahl’s Neo-Buddhist Cult )’, Миссионерско-апологетический проект “К Истине” (Missionary Apologetic Project ‘To the Truth’), 24 October, viewed 21 July 2014, <[http://www.k-istine.ru/sects/nidalh/ole\\_nidahl\\_tomsk.htm](http://www.k-istine.ru/sects/nidalh/ole_nidahl_tomsk.htm)>.

Ruch, C 2006, ‘Buddha, Bungee, Bettgeschichten: Der Lifestyle-Buddhismus von “Lama” Ole Nydahl’ in U Dehn & C Ruch (eds), “Wenn Eisenvögel fliegen...”: Der Tibetische Buddhismus und der Westen, EZW Pamphlet 185, Evangelische Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen, Berlin, pp. 32-36.

Rees, L 2013, ‘Analysis: Why Russia is Defying the Global Trend towards LGBT Equality,’ Pink News, 13 February 2013, viewed 21 July 2014, <<http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2013/02/13/analysis-why-russia-is-defying-the-global-trend-towards-lgbt-equality/>>

Ruegg, SD 1995, ‘Some Reflections on the Place of Philosophy in the Study of Buddhism’, Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies 18.2, pp. 145-181.

- Saalfrank, E 1997, *Geistige Heimat im Buddhismus aus Tibet: Eine empirische Studie am Beispiel der Kagyüpas in Deutschland*, Fabri Verlag, Ulm.
- Scherer, B 2009, 'Interpreting the Diamond Way: Contemporary Convert Buddhism in Transition', *Journal of Global Buddhism* 10, pp. 17-48, viewed 21 July 2014, <<http://www.globalbuddhism.org/10/scherer09.pdf>>.
- 2011, 'Macho Buddhism: Gender and Sexuality in the Diamond Way', *Religion and Gender* 1, pp. 85-103, viewed 21 July 2014, <<http://www.religionandgender.org/index.php/rg/article/view/17/21>>.
- 2012a, 'Globalizing Tibetan Buddhism: Modernism and Neo-Orthodoxy in Contemporary Karma bKa' brgyud Organizations', *Contemporary Buddhism* 13, pp. 125-137.
- 2012b, 'Statement about my Research on the Diamond Way', provided during the public consultation regarding the planning application for the Beaufoy Institute, 11 April.
- 2013, 'Queer Voices, Social Media and Neo-orthodox Dharma: A Case Study' in K O'Mara & L Morrish (eds), *Queering Paradigms, Vol. 3: Bio-Politics, Place, and Representations*, Peter Lang, Oxford, pp. 145-155.
- 2014, 'Conversion, Devotion and (Trans-)Mission: Understanding Ole Nydahl', in T Lewis (ed.), *Buddhists: Understanding Buddhism Through the Lives of Practitioners*, Blackwell Wiley, London, pp. 96-106.
- Schlieter, J 2008, 'Wer hat Angst vor dem Dalai Lama? Victor und Victoria Trimondis Der Schatten des Dalai Lama (1999) als spiritualistische Verschwörungstheorie', *Transformierte Buddhismen* 1, pp. 54-61, viewed 21 July 2014, <<http://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/tb/article/view/10064/3919>>.
- Schmid, G 1998, 'Verschmelzen mit Karmapa: Faszination und Dynamik des Karma-Kagyü-Buddhismus', *Evangelische Informationsstelle: Kirchen - Sekten – Religionen* 1998, Rüti, , viewed 21 July 2014, <<http://www.relinfo.ch/nydahl/vortragtxt.html>>.
- Stepanenko, MV (Степаненко, МВ) 2009, 'Карма-кагью Оле Нидала: проповедь безбожия, медитативных иллюзий и блуда: Ответ Миссионерского отдела Томской епархии на заявление Буддийского центра Алмазного пути "Карма-кагью" г. Томска' (Ole Nydahl's Karma Kagyu: Preaching Atheism, Meditative Illusions and Fornication: Answer of the Missionary Department of the Archdiocese Tomsk to the Statement by the Buddhist Centre of the "Karma Kagyu" Diamond Way), Миссионерско-апологетический проект "К Истине" (Missionary Apologetic Project "To the Truth"), 24 April 2009, viewed 21 July 2014, <[http://www.k-istine.ru/sects/nidalh/ole\\_nidahl\\_stepanenko.htm](http://www.k-istine.ru/sects/nidalh/ole_nidahl_stepanenko.htm)>; & <<http://iriney.ru/psevdobuddijskie/karma-kagyu/novosti-o-karma-kagyu/karma-kagyu-ole-nidala-propoved-bezbozhiya,-meditativnyix-illyuzij-i-bluda.html>>.
- Tweed, TA 2006, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Welford, M 2012, 'Controversial Buddhists', Lambeth Weekender, 9 March 2012, p. 13, viewed 22 July 2014, <<http://info-buddhism.com/ControversialBuddhistsOleNydhal.pdf>>.

Williams, DR & Queen, CS (eds) 1999, *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*. Routledge, London.

## **Biography**

B. SCHERER is Chair of Comparative Religions, Gender and Sexuality at the School of Humanities at Canterbury Christ Church University, United Kingdom. Among B.'s publications are *Buddhismus* (Gütersloh 2005) and *Queering Paradigms* (Oxford 2010). Professor Scherer's research focusses on Buddhist Philosophy; contemporary Buddhist movements and Trans-national Buddhisms; and Queer Theory.

Prof. Dr. B. Scherer  
Chair in Comparative Religion, Gender and Sexuality  
Canterbury Christ Church University  
North Holmes Road  
Canterbury, Kent  
CT1 1QU  
United Kingdom

Email: [b.scherer@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:b.scherer@canterbury.ac.uk)

## Double-clicking the Temple Bell

### Devotional aspects of Jainism online

Tine Vekemans

#### Abstract

In its earliest scriptures, Jainism appears as a non-theist religious tradition with a heavy emphasis on individual ascetic practice on the path towards the ultimate goal of spiritual liberation, or *mokṣa*. However, there is also early evidence of more devotional elements that attained a prominent place in the religious life not only of the lay community, but also of Jain monks and nuns. Practices like *bhajan* and *stavan* (songs of devotion), *darśan* (worship through seeing a deity, a guru or a holy place), and elaborate *pūjā* ceremonies (offerings of different substances) have recently found their place in the wonderful world of the World Wide Web. In their computer mediated form, these practices are often doubly contested: the tension between scriptures emphasizing individual asceticism and practices based on devotional aspects is further enhanced by the tension between offline devotional practices, often performed in temples with other members of the community, and practices mediated by the Internet, where problems of ritual purity of the online place of worship and the right mind-set of the devotee come into play.

Introducing the little explored case of online Jainism, this article aims to add to discussions about computer mediated religious practices, their function, and the possible grounds for their contestation. After situating the different devotional practices in Jainism, I will look into their prevalence online, attempt to identify their target audience and look into their reception. The data used are drawn from a broader dataset of online resources on Jainism and from a series of exploratory interviews conducted between November 2013 and July 2014 on different locations, both in India and in the diaspora.

#### Keywords

Jainism, devotion, Jain bhakti, online ritual, religion on the Internet



## 1 Preliminary Note

The purpose of this article is to assess and address different sorts of mediated religious practice in Jainism, with an emphasis on online manifestations. The study of the processes of adaptation and change in religious practice in function of changes in context, in this case media context in particular, illustrates the dynamic flexibility of what used to be seen as static and unchangeable rituals (Langer et al. 2006, Miczek 2007). However, before entering into the assessment of mediated Jain religious practice that forms the main part of this article, it is necessary to address the often problematized and heavily debated role of rituals and devotion in Jainism in general, so as to put the mediated rituals discussed later in this article in their proper context.

## 2 Introduction: Devotion and Asceticism in Jainism

Jainism is a religious and philosophical tradition which originated on the Indian subcontinent. Academics usually put the beginnings of this tradition in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE and concede that the last of the 24 enlightened teachers or *tīrthaṅkaras*, Lord Mahavira, is a historical figure. Although Jainism has a rich heritage and long tradition, it does not now have a large number of adherents. Presently, there are around 4.5 to 5 million Jains in the world.<sup>1</sup> The community is divided into a lay-community and a community of monks and nuns.

For a long time, Jainism was associated in people's minds with ascetic practices (fasting, pulling out hairs, and naked holy men starving themselves), or alternatively, with the worldly business success of part of the Jain lay community. When it comes to religious practice, it is not all solemn asceticism that makes up Jainism today, as became apparent when I attended a ceremony in a *śvetāmbara* temple in New Delhi, earlier this year:

I was invited to participate in *aṣṭaparakārī* or *aṣṭa dravya pūjā*, together with a group of students studying Jainism. In this ritual, a statue of one of the *tīrthaṅkaras* (also called the *Jina*) is

---

1 According to the 2011 census of India, around 4,225,053 Jains lived in India at that time. Many Jains I spoke with believe the real number to be a bit higher, as some do not like to identify themselves as a minority, and prefer to be counted as a minority sect of Hinduism. The Jains in diaspora are not as easy to count. Some may still have Indian or dual nationality and thus be counted in the census, others now hold other nationalities and will not appear in the Indian census. As most countries now no longer include religious affiliation in their census, it is hard to get clear data on the number of adherents to Jainism in any one place. To make an estimate of the numbers of Jains living in the diaspora, researchers have to rely on information of community organizations or educated guesswork (often based on typical Jain family-names). The results of such an exercise usually lie around 250.000 – 350.000. The largest communities are located in the USA, UK, Nepal and Kenya. Smaller communities of Jains are found in South-East Asia, Japan and Belgium. (Jain 2011)

anointed with eight (*aṣṭa*) types of substance (*dravya*). It is a common, but quite elaborate ritual. We all filed in, and sat ourselves down on the marble temple floor facing the icon of the *Jina*. As with most religious activities in Jainism, the ritual started with the reciting of the foundational mantra of Jain religious practice: the *Navkāra* (or *Namokāra*) mantra. The devotees who were on this occasion to perform the ritual, seemed very anxious to give the observing audience a clear picture of what Jain *pūjā* is about, and started performing the ritual with an air of deep contemplation and perhaps even exaggerated gravitas. When the icon was finally being anointed with the first substances, accompanied by the reciting of prayers and mantras, the room was quiet, full of eager students not wishing to disturb what seemed to us the solemn sanctity of the ritual. All of a sudden, three ladies came in. After a first, slightly awkward look around the room, they had a quick word with the *pūjārī* (temple-attendant), who went off, only to emerge a few minutes later with some musical instruments. The ladies, who obviously knew what they were doing, positioned themselves in front of the icon, and started chanting, singing, and drumming devotional hymns whilst finishing the *dravya pūjā*. Their music filled the entire temple, and the songs featured lyrics addressing the *Jina*, praising him, asking for guidance, and imploring him to take away the bad karma.

A puzzled audience left the temple two hours later, many doubting everything they thought they knew about Jainism: This was not what a student of Jain philosophy and doctrinal text would expect to see and hear. The emphasis on philosophy and asceticism that has long been the standard in Jain studies has given rise to expectations of silent ascetics, sunk deep into contemplation of the self, tranquil temples and adherents in profound meditation. The *Jinas* they contemplate are no longer in this world and so cannot intervene in worldly affairs. They serve only as exemplary human beings and role models and are respected as such. Although asceticism, with practices like fasting, renouncing, and physical expiation, is certainly an aspect, ascetic practice is by no means the full picture of Jainism. Devotional practice (sometimes denoted by the term *bhakti*) such as the *pūjā* and *bhakti*-songs (*bhajan*) described above are a lesser studied and often underrepresented part of Jainism.<sup>2</sup> The experience related above also illustrates that devotional religious practice comes in different brands. John Cort (2002a, p. 85) proposes to view devotional practice as a continuum from sober veneration to frenzied possession, in which case the Jain and Buddhist devotional practices are at one end and cults based on possession by deities at the other. Although one must agree that the Jains perform their rites closer to the pole of sober veneration than to the pole of divine possession, we must allow that there are different styles of veneration within Jainism too. The first part of the *pūjā* described above was done in a very sober way, the ladies that took over half-way through showed us a more exuberant and emotional kind of Jain devotion.

---

2 Exceptions to this rule are several articles by John Cort and the work of Whitney Kelting: Cort (2002a, 2002b and 2012) and Kelting (2001 and 2007).

Early indologists and Western scholars of Jainism, on the rare occasions that they did pay attention to elements of practice and devotion, tended to regard any type of devotion in Jainism as a later addition to the original ascetic core of the tradition, heavily influenced by Hinduism and limited to the lay-community (e.g. Jacobi, cited in Cort 2002a, p. 63). The idea that devotional practice is a ‘foreign element’ in Jainism has recently been eloquently refuted by John Cort (2002a). Even so, understanding the relationship between asceticism and devotion in Jainism poses a challenge to scholars of Jainism and Jains alike. In his work on Jain devotion, Cort does away with the idea that these two forms of practice are opposites or mutually exclusive, stating that “asceticism is done in the spirit of devotion, and devotion is done in the spirit of asceticism”, and additionally that “asceticism is also the object of devotional activity” (Cort 2002b, p. 728).

This interconnection instead of resolute bifurcation is also apparent in the relationship of Jain ascetics and devotional practice. The idea that devotional practices in Jainism are an affair of the lay-community only, and that monks and nuns are to be restricted to ascetic practice, is not viable when confronted with everyday reality.<sup>3</sup> Through their vows of non-possession (*aparigraha*), monks and nuns are indeed excluded from performing *pūjā*-ceremonies (Dundas 1992, p. 205). However, some *sādhūs* and *sādhvīs* are famous for writing and singing devotional hymns, and for being the driving force behind temple-building projects.<sup>4</sup> In this way, apart from being an object of devotion for the lay community, they are definitely involved in devotional practices as well, and have been throughout Jain history (Cort 2002a; Dundas 1992, p. 205).

For the purpose of this article, I have somewhat artificially divided Jain devotional practice into the following categories: *darśan* or looking upon an icon or holy person, *pūjā* or worship that usually entails ritual offerings, and *bhajan* or devotional music and song. Although this is by no means a controversial subdivision, it is important to note that, online as well as offline, these forms of devotional practice often occur in combination with each other, one entailing the other (as *pūjā* entails *darśan*), or one being a part of another (as *bhajans* are often included in a *pūjā* ceremony). Part one of this article aims to give an impression of the most important mechanics of Jain devotional practice, and traces different developments of mediated practice. In part two, I will situate the three categories of Jain devotional practice further and trace their online presence and adaptations. Part three addresses the use and reception of online devotional websites. By way of

---

3 This view was defended by earlier researchers of Jainism such as Johann Georg Buhler and Hermann Jacobi, and still appears in some reference works today (see Cort 2002a, p. 65). In one interview, the person I spoke to argued that the ascetic is indeed the original core of Jainism. He sees the devotional practices as a necessary aide to help the lay devotees focus their minds.

4 A spectacular example of Jain ascetics being the moving force behind temple building projects in modern times is *sādhvī* Shri Gyanmati Mataji, whose visions provided the blueprint for the building of a model of the Jain cosmos and several temples in Hastinapur from the 1970s onwards. Incidentally, the website that informs internet users about the important role of *sādhvī* Shri Gyanmati Mataji (<<http://www.jambudweep.org/>>) also holds the biographic information of another Jain *sādhvī*, Shri Chandnamati Mataji, who is famous for writing *bhajan* songs.

conclusion, I reiterate how Jainism on the Internet fits into the larger whole of research on religion online and what additional research might still be necessary.

### 3 Part I – Jain Devotional Practice

#### 3.1 Introductory notes on Jain devotional practice

In the introduction above, I aimed to illustrate how Jain devotional practice is an integral part of Jainism, and comes in a wide range of shapes and sizes. Although some ceremonies are described in detail in *pūjā* manuals, there are many regional and sectarian variations. None of the Jains I spoke to see this variety and multiplicity as a problem. To paraphrase one of my Indian respondents: “It is not so much what you do as with what mindset you do it.” Or as Paul Dundas wrote in the standard handbook on Jainism, “The Jains”:

What is really important in the ritual is to have an appropriate inner, spiritual disposition (*bhāva*) so that, to this extent, an act of worship can only be carried by an individual on his or her own behalf. (Dundas 1992, p. 205)

Just as the ritual actions can vary, the object of veneration in Jainism can be different things, some more abstract than others: souls that have attained liberation (*mokṣa*), scriptures, good conduct, the travelling ascetic, the mendicant leader, the mendicant hierarchy, *Jina*, liberation, spiritual peace, meditative absorption, the holy continent of Nandivara, and *Jina* image and temple (Cort, 2002b, p. 733). When discussing Jain devotional practice, and in particular online Jain devotional practice, the more tangible of these objects of veneration such as *Jina* images, temples and mendicants (meaning Jain monks and nuns) are the ones that will come back most often. The situation becomes more complicated, as not all Jain sects accept all the objects of veneration cited in the list. The most notable difference centers on the veneration of the *Jina* image in a temple. Not all Jain sects perform such worship. The majority of Jain sects are *mūrtipūjak*, meaning that they build temples to house statues of the *Jinas* which they venerate. For these sects, a temple can be a large village or communal temple, but many also have a small shrine or ‘temple’ at home, housing an icon of the *Jina*. However, other Jain sects do not adhere to this practice. Notably, the *śvetāmbara sthānakvāsī* sect and their offshoot the *śvetāmbara terapanth* reject representations of the *Jinas*, put more emphasis on silent prayer and meditation, and thus have no need of temples either. These sects do build prayer halls for communal ceremonies (Dundas 1992, pp. 200-201). Online forms of

devotional practice which entail visual material representing a *Jina* image are evidently not aimed at these groups.

### 3.2 Mediated devotional practice in Jainism

We now turn our attention towards mediated devotional practice and find ourselves on contested ground. While some scholars have argued that recent adaptations in ritual traditions as can be perceived online are symptoms of the commodification that will ultimately destroy religious and cultural traditions, others point out that this interpretation is based on an overly static and reified view of what constitutes a tradition (Brosius and Polit 2011, p. 271). Researchers that adhere to this second viewpoint emphasize the dynamic character of rituals and traditions, arguing that processes of transfer<sup>5</sup>, adaptation and invention are always, and have always been, at work within them (Miczek 2007, p. 199). Seen in this light, new media technologies may be appreciated as they provide possibilities of diversification and connection to a wider audience (Brosius and Polit 2011, p. 271).

Of course, mediated religious practice was not invented simultaneously with the World Wide Web. Long before the world took its first hesitant steps in cyber space, print media and photography facilitated the first mediated forms of Jain devotional practice. Arguably, these contextual changes had their impact on ritual practice. Indeed, the availability and popularity of different media influence and alter the terms of cultural articulation and practice of which rituals make up an important part (Brosius and Polit 2011, p. 268). In the case of Jainism, photography and printing made it easier for devotees to have pictures of an icon or a guru in their home. This opened up the possibility of indirect *darśan*. In many Jain homes and offices one can still find large framed pictures of the family guru or a respected ascetic, and sometimes also of one of the major holy places of Jainism. Print media made doctrinal texts, but also devotional poetry, hymns, and sermons of ascetics more readily available. The next technologies that enabled new forms of mediated religion, were radio and television. Several Jain radio and television channels and programs have been established in the last decades. While some of the broadcasted content on Jain radio and television wishes to inform or entertain the audience (talk shows, documentary type programs, news, et al.), we also find devotional aspects in the programming: live *bhajan* music, monks and nuns giving sermons, ceremonies (*ārṭī* and *pūjā*), and “back to back devotional music from midnight ‘till morning”.

---

5 For an elaboration on ritual transfer, see: Langer, R, Lüddeckens, D, Radde, K, Snoek J 2006, 'Transfer of Ritual', *Journal of Ritual Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 1–10.

These different types of media each broadened the scope of mediated devotional practice, deepening the visual and adding an auditory dimension. Today, we see that the Internet has in many ways encompassed these earlier forms of mediated religious practice: a lot of Jain photographic material and printed media are now also accessible online.<sup>6</sup> Radio and television have by now all found their way to online platforms as well. The two most well-known Jain television channels are Paras TV and Mahavira TV Channel. Both broadcast in India, but are available for online viewing elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> Television programs such as US-based Mangalam, are made especially for the Jains living in the diaspora. Mangalam is broadcast in North America and Europe, but all episodes have been uploaded to YouTube, and are offered embedded on the show's website for online viewing.<sup>8</sup> Most Jain radio channels are local stations based in India. However, others aim for a larger, global audience by broadcasting online. Radio Jinvaani<sup>9</sup>, advertising itself as the World's first Jain devotional radio broadcasting from Pune is one such radio station, and the astonishingly similar sounding Radio Jinvani<sup>10</sup>, self-proclaimed World's first and only Jain radio channel, is another that seems to be quite popular.

The Internet is not just a repository containing the online versions of offline media. The computer has added new possibilities of participation and interaction to mediated ritual practice, as we will see in part two of this article. All of these forms and incarnations of Jainism form part of the interconnected corpus of Jainism-related websites that has been the object of my research in the previous years. When we regard the whole of this corpus, the larger part of websites clearly has a prime informational or organizational objective.

However, in addition to the functions traditionally attributed to the Internet, namely communication and information, the Internet has also clearly become a resource and a space for devotional practice (Hackett 2006, p. 68). An analysis of the "virtual manifestations" of religions through modern media, including their purpose, use, and reception has now become an essential aspect of any attempt to come to grips with the ritual dynamics of different religions.

---

6 For example <<http://www.jainjagruti.in>>.

7 Paras TV has a live-stream and programs on demand service and a large selection of programs on their YouTube channel <<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC6E1pvhGa55AaZ-svF70ViA>>. Mahavira TV channel has some videos embedded in their website and have several you-tube channels (the main one seems to be <<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvx4BldWdFkqB6qvNEqHCIYA>>).

8 <<http://mangalamshow.com>>.

9 Accessible through <<http://www.radiojinvaani.com>>.

10 Accessible through <<http://www.jainmedialive.com/index.php>>.

## 4 Part II – Types of Jain devotional practice, online and offline

### 4.1 Darśan

*Darśan* or “looking” is perhaps the simplest form of worship. Typically, it denotes the devotee who comes to the temple to look upon the icon. Scholars are still debating the ritual mechanisms of *darśan*, mostly in the context of Hinduism (e.g. Gonda 1969, Eck 1981, Babb 1981). Often, it is said to have a transactional, bilateral function: The devotee sees the icon, the icon sees the devotee, and a bond is established between the two. The tradition in *śvetāmbara* temples to adorn the icons and fit them with exuberantly large glass eyes seems to confirm this idea. Yet in hymns and manuals there is no indication of *darśan* being interpreted as a two-way phenomenon (Cort 2012, p. 30). The icon is supposed to be a focal point for the devotees inner contemplations. As the *Jinas* are liberated souls that are no longer present in this world, they cannot simultaneously inhabit the icon to look back at the devotee. *Darśan* is not limited to icons. A devotee can also take *darśan* of a holy place or *tīrth*, or of a guru, monk or nun. When taking *darśan* of a monk or nun, devotees bow very low (*vandana*) and if they are of the same sex, it is customary that they touch the feet of the ascetic. This is often mirrored in temples, with people touching the feet of the icon (where permitted) or the pedestal upon which it stands.

The visual aspect of *darśan* makes it well-suited for use in visual media. On the Internet, *darśan* takes many forms. Online television and YouTube channels provide footage of the holy places like Girnar or the temples of Palitana for mediated *tīrth darśan*, or pilgrimage. Many websites include photo and video galleries full of pictures of *sādhūs*, *sādhvīs*, icons and holy places. In some cases, this kind of album is explicitly titled *sant darśan*, or *e-darśan*. Even when they are denoted simply as ‘picture gallery’, the typical style of the pictures, especially in the case of pictures of monks and nuns, reveals that they are unmistakably geared towards the devotional. Some of these images have been turned into desktop wallpapers and screensavers available for download as well.

### 4.2 Pūjā

*Pūjā* in Sanskrit and Hindi means ‘offering, adoration’. The two main categories of *pūjā* in Jainism are *dravya pūjā*, being the offering of substances, and *bhāva pūjā*, which denotes psychic worship. *Dravya pūjā*, like the *aṣṭa dravya pūjā* described at the outset of this article is one of the more elaborate forms of *pūjā* regularly performed by (or in the presence of) the lay community. It consists of the anointing or presenting of the *Jina* with auspicious substances. There are also shorter

and more simple forms, in which a smaller number of substances are offered. *Ārtī* is often taken to be the simplest form of *pūjā*, and consists only of the waving of a lamp in circles in front of the icon. *Pūjā* is not limited to a sequence of actions. *Pūjā* manuals prescribe hymns and incantations which form part of the ritual. Other, often very elaborate, rituals which are tied up with specific holy days or the installing of a new icon are beyond the scope of this article, as they have no online variant.

*Dravya pūjā* has found its way to the Internet as well. YouTube and online television channels enable computer users to watch *pūjā* on their computer screens. Some websites take it one step further and include software that lets the user perform the rites on the statue him or herself. In this case, an icon, often a depiction of an existing icon rather than a computer generated image, appears on the screen. The user can dip the cursor in a bowl of saffron paste depicted next to or under the icon, and apply this to the icon by clicking. Similarly he can drag the cursor to deposit flowers in front of the statue, sway a burning oil lamp or candle in front of the icon and so on. More often than not, this is accompanied by devotional music and song. Some websites take extra care to replicate the temple experience, asking users to ring the electronic temple bell trice and recite or listen to the *ṇamokār* mantra sound file before starting the ritual.

On the website of a Jain temple in Rajasthan,<sup>11</sup> the Internet user is invited to perform *ārtī*. Once the visitor clicks on the button ‘online *ārtī*’ in the menu, *bhajan* music starts playing, and the image of Lord Nakodajī appears on the screen. Next to the idol, different buttons depict the temple bell, flowers, sandal or saffron paste, incense, an oil lamp and a coconut. The user is now free to perform *ārtī* at his or her own discretion. Other e-temples offer a more simple *pūjā*, with less agency for the user. One website<sup>12</sup> only allows the user to click, drag and offer some flowers to an icon of the *Jina*. Then, after clicking the ‘do pooja’ button, the icon is automatically anointed with saffron (or sandalwood) paste. The full *aṣṭa dravya pūjā*, like the one I observed in Delhi, can be performed online on <<http://www.jainuniversity.org/>>. Each of the substances, when clicked, starts a new hymn.

### 4.3 Bhajan

Devotional songs and poetry are an important part of Jain devotional practice. Typically considered the domain of women rather than men, *bhajan* music is very popular, and a number of the ladies I spoke to in India and Europe regularly take part in some sort of formal or informal *bhajan* group. These devotional songs are sometimes sung and/or played at home, but originally most are meant to

---

11 <[www.shreenakoda.com](http://www.shreenakoda.com/)>.

12 <[www.jain.8m.com](http://www.jain.8m.com/)>.



be part of a ritual in the temple or prayer hall.<sup>13</sup> The topic of the songs varies, but often the lyrics contain pleas to a *tīrthāṅkara* for help and guidance:

Inner Lord, hear my song, the glory of the Three Worlds is yours. Hearing you, I came to your door, you carry me across the sorrow of birth and death. Do this for your servant, O King, give us the joy of liberation. O Lord! O Gem of Shankheshvar, Sahib, pay attention to this request Says Jinaharsa, rescue me, your servant, from the sea of emotions, Do this for your servant, O King, give us the joy of liberation. O Lord! (Shankheshvar Parshvanath Stavan, cited in Kelting 2001, p.133-34)

Online *bhajan* and *bhajan* downloads are probably the most widespread devotional resources online. Online radio stations broadcast devotional songs whenever they have no other programs running (typically through the night). Other websites offer a large array of audio files that can be listened to online. Lastly, some websites offer downloadable audio-files of *bhajans* (and also sermons). Some of these websites try to create a serious environment and seem to offer these downloads by way of aide of worship at home or religious teaching, others offer the more popular hymns as ringtones or background music.

## 5 Part III – Reception and Perception of Online Jainism

In what preceded, I have presented an overview of what kinds of Jain devotional practices there are, and how they translate into an online environment. But what is the purpose of online religion? And, relatedly, who do websites offering the opportunities for online devotional practice aim to reach, and how are they received and used by the people who they are meant for? Whereas information on purpose and target audience can be found readily available on most websites, their use and reception are more difficult to deduce. In a series of some 25 exploratory interviews at different locations, I have asked the opinions of practicing Jains from different sects and backgrounds on online rituals and resources. This information, supplemented with existing research on online religious practice in other (South-Asian) traditions, gives us some idea of the role and use of the websites described above.

---

<sup>13</sup> For a more elaborate reading of the role of women in Jain devotional practice, and the role of devotional music in Jainism in general, see Kelting 2001.

## 5.1 Purpose and Target Audience

To learn more about the purpose and target-audience of websites offering Jain devotional resources, it pays to start with a look in the websites' 'about us' section. One of the *pūjā* websites has the following statement of purpose:

The purpose of creating Pooja Software was to avail the opportunity to do pooja in many tirths<sup>14</sup> at any time, any place, and for everyone. Our main purpose behind this Pooja is that there are many people who are not financially sound and old people who can't travel long distance can also do pooja. (<[www.jain.8m.com](http://www.jain.8m.com)>)

Another website offering Jain screensavers in exchange for a donation to charity claims Jain Desktop wallpapers and screensavers have...

... also proved as an excellent source for the aged and elderly people to gain darshan (worship) right at their place; and for those who find it difficult to undertake yatra (religious tour) and visit Jain temples due to age factor. (<<http://www.nirmaldosti.com/screensaver/index1.html>>)

The two statements of purpose above give the impression that the online rituals are mostly a convenient plan B for people who are otherwise unable to go to a temple, guru or holy place, such as the elderly or the poor. Other websites put more emphasis on novel ways of incorporating the religious into the devotees daily routine at work and at home, perhaps complementary to worship in a temple. Or as Radio Jinvani's YouTube channel claims: "Experience elevation through Jain stavans and profound recitations"<sup>15</sup>. On downloadable picture material and wallpapers, one website claims:

Desktop Wallpaper of Gods, Gurus and Holy Places on our working desktops are a way to reassert their subtle presence in our day to day life. The belief that the power of the God or the Guru above will keep us safe and at peace instigates us to keep there (sic) presence always in our life. To effuse your working atmosphere with a divine presence grace your desktop with the Desktop Wallpaper of Shree Dharmachakra Prabhav Tirth. (<<http://dharmachakra.in/Downloads/Jain-Desktop-Wallpapers.aspx>>)

---

14 A tīrth is a place that is considered holy, often because one of the 24 teachers of Jainism was born, died or attained liberation there. It is considered auspicious to go on pilgrimages to visit these places. Such pilgrimages are called tīrth-yātrā.

15 <<https://www.youtube.com/user/JAINRADIO24x7/about>>.

## 5.2 Reception and Use

Although the Internet features an increasing number of websites offering devotional practices and resources, the existence of these is hardly evidence of their popularity, reception, and use. The number of hits on a particular website is often traceable, but this does not necessarily inform us on the intent of the users behind these hits. For example, one particular website hosting online *pūjā* boasts over 650 hits since 2010.<sup>16</sup> Apart from that being a relatively low number, one can wonder how many of these hits were people who actually performed the *pūjā* with a Jain devotional mindset. The statistics of this website reveal five hits from Belgium in the previous year. I am pretty sure my own research accounts for all of these.

This raises a key issue and concern when studying religion on the Internet: What action or online activity can be considered a genuine religious action? How is it possible to determine if the people practicing forms of online religion are in fact conducting actual religious activities and having genuine religious experiences? As ritual studies recognize, it is not merely the action that makes an activity religious, rather it is the intent behind the action that gives it its religious significance. (Helland 2005, p. 6)

Indeed, the statements of purpose do not simply translate into patterns of reception and use. Although, to my knowledge, none of the existing research has specifically addressed the case of Jainism, research on online devotional practice in other South Asian religions has brought to light some of the common limitations of, and possible objections to, computer mediated religion. In her research on Sai Baba devotion on the Internet, Sophie Hawkins (1999) notes that the absence of the tactile and social aspects of ritual through online platforms can be grounds for objection. Discussing Vaishnava online *pūjā* in the USA, Nicole Karapanagiotis (2010) recorded problems of ritual purity of the online content, the users' computer and the user him or herself. Both these objections resonate in the discussions I had with Jains from different backgrounds, and essentially center on the dichotomies of sacred/profane and real/virtual that have become severely challenged in the contemporary context (Jacobs 2007, pp. 1103-1106).

With one or two exceptions, all my respondents were aware of the existence of the possibilities of online *pūjā*, *darśan* and *bhajan*, but none of the people I spoke to so far have admitted to making use of online *pūjā* as part of their regular ritual practice. From the discussions I have had with Jains in different places and from different sectarian backgrounds, I learned that these online practices are not denounced, but neither are they generally accepted as an equal alternative for offline devotional practice. For many, there was a general feeling of things being out of context.

---

<sup>16</sup> <[www.jain.8m.com](http://www.jain.8m.com)>.

The smells of incense and flowers, the ringing of the temple bell, the sound of the voices of other devotees singing different *bhajans*, the view of the temple as the devotee approaches for morning worship, the touching of the icon or a guru's feet,... These and other such impressions lack in (computer) mediated *darśan* and *pūjā*. A number of my respondents in India indicated that they saw online *darśan* and *pūjā* mostly as for Jains living abroad, meaning far removed from (or too busy to go to) actual temples and gurus.

Some also expressed doubt about the possibility of being in the right mindset for worship when surfing the Internet. The environment in which devotional practice takes place has its impact on the inner, spiritual disposition (*bhāva*) of the devotee, which is the most important parameter in devotional practice. Inappropriate elements might be invasive commercial adds on the website or work stored on the computer that might grab the devotees attention or compel him or her to rush through rituals. This doubt echoes the ritual purity argument that became apparent in Nicole Karapanagiotis's (2010) analyses, and also relates to the commodification of religion and religious practice.

So, although online *bhajans*, *darśan* and *pūjā* are not denounced, there are a number of possible grounds for the contestation of these practices in online environments. At least in the eyes of most of my respondents, in the case of Jainism, online religious practice is not (yet) an organic extension of the offline religious experience. One of my respondents in Delhi illustrated this dual attitude very well. This man had a devotional hymn as a ringtone on his mobile phone, but, when asked about this, he indicated that "our hymns really shouldn't be used as such".

## 6 Conclusion and Discussion: Online Jainism and Jainism Online

In recent years there has been some excellent scholarship on Christianity and Islam online, and research focusing on Hinduism's online enunciations is catching up. Because of the vast difference in size of the respective communities, in religious organization and in ritual mechanisms, it is difficult to compare the online presence of Jainism with that of other religious traditions. However, it is necessary to situate Jainism in the broader context of the study of religion on the Internet. One of the most used theoretical frameworks for analyzing religion on the Internet is Christopher Helland's online religion/religion online continuum.

The term 'online religion' refers to the actual participation in religion on the Internet. This can include activities ranging from the spinning of Buddhist cyber-prayer wheels and the attending of webcast Catholic masses, to the offering of virtual flowers to gurus and spiritual masters, or e-mailing one's

prayers to God. In contrast, the term ‘religion online’ refers to the information about various religious traditions and groups that is present on the Internet (Karapanagiotis, 2010, p. 179).

In a reprise of his original article prompted by the critical remarks of Glen Young (2004), Christopher Helland further elaborated on the online religion/religion online continuum, placing more emphasis on participation and interactivity as prerequisites for true online religion (Helland 2005). This new emphasis complicates matters when we want to place Jainism in the online religion/religion online framework.

When researching Jainism’s online presence there are a few things that immediately become apparent. First, although only about 5% of Jains live outside India, more than half of the findable websites concerning Jainism are hosted outside India. Most of these are hosted by Jain individuals or organizations in the diaspora. The Jain diaspora, and especially the Jains living in the USA, play a major role in the representation of Jainism online. The language used on most of these websites is English. Only very few websites make exclusive use of Hindi or Gujarati. Second, the vast majority of websites have the prime objective to inform Jains and non-Jains on Jainism and its ethical system or ‘the Jain way of life’ and so fall into the category of religion online, rather than online religion. Third, although most websites nowadays have some form of interactive system (ranging from a newsletter one can subscribe to, via presence on Facebook, YouTube or Twitter, to message boards and forums), the level of interaction and discussion on most of these is rather low.

When we look specifically at websites containing elements that may be used for religious devotional practice, we find that these constitute only a relatively small part of the corpus. The most prevalent in this category are websites exclusively devoted to, or including a section on, devotional music or *bhajans*. The second most prevalent category is websites including picture galleries containing snapshots, posters and video footage of monks, nuns, icons and places of pilgrimage (such as Girnar, Palitana (Satrunjaya), and Hastinapur). Although footage and radio broadcasts of *pūjā*-ceremonies are part of the programming of Jain radio and television channels online and offline, websites enabling the individual PC user to perform *pūjā* on the Internet are more rare.

Although online *darśan* and *pūjā* are certainly online ritual activities - and I would argue are closer to online religion than to religion online – they are asynchronous<sup>17</sup>, and the level of interactivity and participation involved is rather low. The user may in some cases be the one performing ritual actions by clicking on icons, but he or she does not decide what the icons are. None of the websites I found gave the devotee the possibility to communicate or share their experience. Although most websites in the corpus have some interactive features, these are almost exclusively informational and do not include elements of devotional practice. Collective,

---

17 For more on the distinction between synchronous and asynchronous ritual interaction, see: Jacobs, S 2007, p. 1111.

synchronous, online devotional practices like the prayer meetings described by scholars researching online Christianity such as Campbell (2005) and Young (2004) do not occur in the case of Jainism.

When it comes to Jainism's devotional aspects and Jainism's online presence, there is still more work to be done. Although most of my respondents knew of the existence of websites offering devotional music, picture materials and software, none of them had ever performed online *pūjā*. To fully come to terms with the reception and use of the websites discussed above, a broader survey is necessary, supplemented by interviews with users as well as content providers, before we can attempt a complete interpretation and conclusion on the different aspects of the computer mediated practice of Jainism.

## Bibliography

Babb, LA 1981, 'Glancing: Visual Interaction in Hinduism', *Journal of Anthropological Research*, vol. 37, no. 4, pp. 387–401.

Brosius, C and Polit, K 2011, 'Introducing Media Rituals and Ritual Media', in A. Michaels (ed.), *Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual (Volume IV)*, Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden, pp. 267-275.

Campbell, H 2005, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We Are One in the Network*, Peter Lang, New York.

Cort, JE 2002a, 'Bhakti in the Early Jain Tradition: Understanding Devotional Religion in South Asia', *History of Religions*, vol. 42, no. 1, pp. 59-86.

Cort, JE 2002b, 'Singing the Glory of Asceticism: Devotion of Asceticism in Jainism', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 70, no. 4, pp. 719-742.

Cort, JE 2012, 'Situating Darśan: Seeing the Digambar Jina Icon in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century North India', *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, vol. 16, no.1, pp. 1–56.

Dundas, P 1992, *The Jains*. Routledge: London and New York.

Eck, DL 1981, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, Anima Books: Chambersburg.

Gonda, J 1969, *Eye and Gaze in the Veda*, North-Holland Publishing: Amsterdam.

Hackett, IJ 2006, 'Religion and the Internet', *Diogenes* no. 211, pp. 67–76.

Hawkins, S 1999, 'Bordering Realism: The Aesthetics of Sai Baba's Mediated Universe', in C Brosius and M Butcher (eds.), *Image Journeys: Audio-Visual Media and Cultural Change in India*, Sage Publications: New Delhi, pp. 139–162.

Helland, C 2000, 'Religion Online/Online Religion and virtual Communitas', in JK Hadden and DE Cowan (eds.), *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises (Religion and Social Order 8)*, JAI Press/Elsevier Science: London, pp. 205-224.

Helland, C 2005, 'Online Religion as Lived Religion: Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet', *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 1-16, <<http://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/religions/article/view/380>>.

Jacobs, S 2007, 'Virtually Sacred: The Performance of Asynchronous Cyber-Rituals in Online Spaces', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol.12, no. 3, pp. 1103-1121.

Jain, PC 2011, *Jains in India and Abroad, A Sociological Introduction*. ISJS: New Delhi.

Karapanagiotis, N 2010, 'Vaishnava Cyber-Pūjā: Problems of Purity & Novel Ritual Solutions', *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 179-195.

Kelting, MW 2001, *Singing to the Jinas : Jain Laywomen, Mandal Singing, and the Negotiations of Jain Devotion*, Oxford University Press: New York.

Kelting, MW 2007, 'Candanbala's Tears: Recovering the Emotional Life of Jainism', *Numen*, no. 54, pp. 109-137.

Langer, R, Lüddeckens, D, Radde, K, Snoek J 2006, 'Transfer of Ritual', *Journal of Ritual Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 1–10.

Miczek, N 2007, 'Rituals Online: Dynamic Processes Reflecting Individual Perspectives', *Masaryk University Journal of Law and Technology*, vol. 2, pp. 197-204.

Young, G 2004, 'Reading and Praying Online: The Continuity of Religion Online and Online Religion in Internet Christianity', in L Dawson And D Cowan (eds.), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, Routledge: New York, pp. 93-106.

## Referred Websites

Website of *Census of India*. Domain holder: The Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. Retrieved on August 13, 2014, from [http://censusindia.gov.in/Census\\_And\\_You/religion.aspx](http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_And_You/religion.aspx).

Website providing online pūjā. Domain holder: Geetesh and Anand Jain. Retrieved on August 31, 2014, from [www.jain.8m.com](http://www.jain.8m.com).

Website of *Shree Dharmachakra Prabhav Tirth*. Domain holder: RD Consultancy, India. Retrieved on August 31, 2014, from <http://dharmachakra.in>.

Website of *Jain Tirthankars Screensaver*. Domain holder: Nitesh Kumar Jain, India. Retrieved on August 25, 2014, from <http://www.nirmaldosti.com/screensaver/index1.html>.

Website of *Shree Nakoda Ji Jain Temple*. Domain holder: Navkar Consultancy, India. Retrieved on August 30, 2014, from [http://www.shreenakoda.com/Online\\_Arti.htm](http://www.shreenakoda.com/Online_Arti.htm).

Website of *Jain University*. Domain holder: Jain University, India. Retrieved on August 25, 2014, from [www.jainuniversity.org](http://www.jainuniversity.org).

Website of *Radio Jinvani*. Domain holder: JainMediaLive. Retrieved on August 25, 2014, from <http://www.jainmedialive.com/index.php>.

Website of *Radio Jinvaani*. Domain holder: RadioJinvaani, India. Retrieved on August 25, 2014, from <http://www.radiojinvaani.com>.

Website of *Mangalam TV Show*. Domain holder: Mangalamshow.com, USA. Retrieved on August 31, 2014, from <http://www.mangalamshow.com>.

Website of *Mahavira TV Channel*. Domain holder: Shailputri, India. Retrieved on August 31, 2014, from <http://mahaviratvchannel.com/>.

Website of *Paras TV*. Domain holder: Arvind Saini, India. Retrieved on August 31, 2014, from <http://www.paraschannel.com/video.php>.

Website of *Jain Jagruti*. Domain holder: Mr. and Mrs. Chordia, India. Retrieved on August 31, 2014, from <http://www.jainjagruti.in/>.

Website of *Jambudweep Hastinapur*. Domain holder: Udai Prakash Jain, India. Retrieved on August 31, 2014, from <http://www.jambudweep.org>.

YouTube Channel of *Radio Jinvani*. Retrieved on August 28, 2014, from: <https://www.youtube.com/user/JAINRADIO24x7/about>.

YouTube Channel of *Mahavira TV Channel*. Retrieved on August 28, 2014, from: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvx4BldWdFkB6qvNEqHCIYA>.

YouTube Channel of *Paras TV*. Retrieved on August 28, 2014, from: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC6E1pvhGa55AaZ-svF70ViA>.



**Biographical Note**

TINE VEKEMANS works as a doctoral researcher at the Department for Languages and Cultures at the University of Ghent, Belgium. She holds a master's degree in Indian languages and Cultures. After spending five years working as an interpreter and social assistant for South Asian migrants in Belgium, she returned to Ghent University to pursue a PhD. Her research focuses on the intersections of migration, religion and media. The case she analyses is that of Jainism. Her other interests include contemporary South-Asian politics, migration law, and political philosophy.

Dra. Tine Vekemans  
Faculty of Arts and Philosophy  
Department of Languages and Cultures – Indian Languages and Cultures  
Ghent University  
Blandijnberg 2  
9000 Ghent  
Belgium  
[Tine.Vekemans@ugent.be](mailto:Tine.Vekemans@ugent.be)

# **Remixing Images of Islam**

## **The Creation of New Muslim Women Subjectivities on YouTube**

Kayla Renée Wheeler

### **Abstract**

This study provides a textual analysis of YouTube videos produced by two popular Western English-speaking vloggers, Amenakin and Nye Armstrong using Guo and Lee's hybrid vernacular discourse framework. Vernacular discourse is defined as speech and culture that includes music, art, and fashion, which resonates within a local community. The framework focuses on three components: content, agency, and subjectivity. I extend this framework by examining audience response to the new images through analyzing comments and response videos. Recognizing that the boundaries between vernacular and mainstream discourse are blurred, my research is guided by the following question: How are Muslim women rearticulating and renegotiating mainstream and vernacular discourses to introduce new and complex images of Muslim womanhood that challenge mainstream Western representations of Muslim women?

### **Keywords**

Islam in the West, women, YouTube, vernacular discourse

## **1 Introduction**

Marginalized people do not have the same level of social and financial capital required in mainstream Western cultures to get their voices heard (Ananda 2004, p. 494). As such, many have turned to the Web, where they have the opportunity to create a 'presence' that is often denied to them in the physical world, in order to provide alternative and fuller images of themselves. This has been especially true for Muslim women living in the West, who have to confront images created by mainstream Western society in which they are characterized as voiceless and oppressed others, as well as social norms among conservative Muslims that dictate women should remain silent in

public settings (Bullock & Jafri 2000, p. 35). YouTube, a video sharing social networking website, has become a place for such confrontations in which Muslim women are using the space to connect with each other and to form new subjectivities that challenge the images of Muslim womanhood created by mainstream Western society and conservative Muslim cultures.

Using Guo and Lee's hybrid vernacular discourse framework, I provide a textual analysis of six videos produced by two Muslim women YouTube video bloggers, or vloggers as they will be referred to. The first is Amena Khan, who goes by the username Amenakin, and is the most popular Muslim woman on YouTube. The second vlogger is Nye Armstrong, who has only reached a moderate level of success compared to Khan. By examining two women on opposite ends of the Islamic vlogging community in terms of popularity, I will show how Muslim women living in the West use YouTube are working together in order to construct new subjectivities. A secondary focus is on how their audience, made up largely of Muslim women and non-Muslim women interested in learning more about Islam, have responded to their identity constructions. My paper is guided by the following research questions. In what way are Muslim women challenging stereotypical representations of Muslim women while simultaneously creating new images and discourses? How do different agencies shape or constrain their discourse? How have their audiences responded to their discourse?

## **2 Snapshot of Muslims on YouTube**

Founded in 2005, YouTube is the largest video-viewing website in the world. As a social networking website, people are able to interact with one another through posting comments, subscribing to a vlogger's channel, up or down voting a video, and posting response videos. Interaction on YouTube helps promote a dialogue between the programmer and viewer. The website's simple format allows anyone with access to a computer and an Internet connection to join the site and post videos, free of charge. However, since hosting a channel and posting videos requires time and money, one could argue that it is most accessible to middle and upper-class people.

Borrowing from Suad Abdul Khabeer (2007, p. 126), I argue that there are two types of vloggers who profess Islam as their religion: Muslim vloggers and Islamic vloggers. The former group places their religion as secondary in their videos. In some instances, it takes watching several videos before one can ascertain a vlogger's religious affiliation. For example, the creator of fouseyTUBE, Yousef Saleh Erakat, who is famous for his yoga pants prank videos, is one of the most popular Muslim vloggers with over 2 million subscribers and combined video views of over

205,000,000. He alludes to his faith in his early videos, such as “Middle Eastern Mistakes” and “Salaaam: The new WAZZUP!”, but rarely addresses issues of religious identity. While their audience might include Muslims, Muslim vloggers target their videos to the YouTube community as a whole. Muslim vlogging is dominated by men.

The second category and the focus of this paper are Islamic vloggers, who place Islam at the center of their videos. Borrowing from Patricia Lange (2009, p. 71), Islamic vloggers mainly produce videos of affinity in which they seek to create communicative connections with other people. These videos can be directed to a small network of offline friends or to an imagined audience with an unlimited reach. Affinity videos seek to create a bond between the producer and the audience (Lange 2009, p. 73). Recorded in mundane settings and speaking directly into the camera, these vloggers seek to create a casual environment that promotes conversation. They tend to respond to their audience through the comment section and in future videos. It is this relationship rather than interesting content, although it helps, that keeps viewers coming back for more (Lange 2009, p. 71.) Islamic vloggers produce videos that focus on different aspects of Islam, which are directed towards Muslims, although many vloggers have a sizeable following of non-Muslims interested in the religion. Islamic vlogging can be broken into four main categories: fashion, lifestyle, advice, and religious instruction. This type of vlogging is dominated by women, who tend to focus mainly on fashion and lifestyle vlogging. For this paper, I am only interested in examining original user-generated content produced by people who are not a part of the ulama, or religious academic community. Many people upload lectures from famous Muslim scholars, Quranic recitations, and the call to prayer without providing their own commentary. These are perhaps the most popular and widely dispersed type of Islamic videos. However, there is no interaction between these channel owners and their audience, which is central to the formation of new images and subjectivities.

### **3 Literature review**

#### **3.1 Muslim Women in Mainstream Western Media**

Islam and the role of Muslim women has been a topic of discussion in the Western world since Muslims first made contact with European in the late seventh century. In nearly fourteen centuries the rhetoric in the West has stayed the same; Muslims are antithesis to Western culture and seek to bring violence to it (Lewis 2001, p. 18). There are three main interconnected depictions of Muslim women that dominate mainstream Western media: foreigner, oppressed subject, and terrorist.

The notion of Muslims being seen as foreign in their own land is a major theme in Yvonne Haddad's (2011) book, *Becoming American?* Haddad (2011, p. 94) argues that the notion of Muslims, especially Arab Muslims as the Other has been inflamed by a number of events including the oil boycott of 1973, the Iranian Revolution, and 9/11. For many Westerners, Arab and Muslim go hand in hand. Thus, mainstream constructions of Muslimness are influenced by race. In their examination of Canadian newspaper articles on Islam, Bullock and Jafri (2000) argue that this is partly due to the fact that Islam and Muslims are usually discussed in the foreign affairs section, rather than in the national news. When they do appear in the national news, reporters emphasize their ethnic origins, which is usually defined as Arab or South Asian, who are fairly new inhabitants to the U.S. and Canada, erasing the large numbers of Black and white Muslims (Bullock & Jafri 2000, p. 36). This is troubling especially because Islam in North America, brought over by enslaved Africans, predates the signing of the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution Act.

Myra MacDonald (2006, p. 9) highlights the obsession that non-Muslim Westerners have with the veil, which is characterized as feminine, dangerous, and seductive. Most importantly, it is seen as a tool that Muslim men use to oppress Muslim women. These views of the veil have motivated liberal Westerners to try to help Muslim women 'unveil' themselves in an attempt to save them from what they deem to be a backwards and oppressive religion. Not only has this view of the oppressed veiled Muslim woman dominated mainstream media, it has also trickled over into politics. The need to liberate oppressed Muslim women was one of the supposed aims of the invasion of Afghanistan (MacDonald 2006, p. 10). In some countries, such as France, it has even led to a ban on niqabs in public spaces in the name of safety and assimilation.

Muslim women are often characterized as both victims of their religion and threats to the West. When mainstream Western media moves past the image of a cloistered, oppressed Muslim woman, it focuses on the potential danger of Muslim women entering the public sphere and becoming political active in extremist groups (Falah 2005, p. 313). Since 9/11 and 7/7, the biggest image of Muslims, both men and women have been as terrorists, whose presences poses a risk to domestic and international security. The image of angry Muslims willing to become suicide bombers in the name of jihad, a term that has been misappropriated, has been used in a number of popular television shows including *24*, *Homeland*, and *Sleeper Cell*. Muslim women are not seen as actively constructing the image of terrorist. As Falah (2005, p. 315) points out, Muslim women who engage in political violence are often seen to be misguided believers or brainwashed by Muslim men. Again, they are helpless victims that need to be saved from both oppression and extremism.

A common theme that emerges in these pieces is of Muslim women's voices being absent in these discussions; they is always spoken for instead of with. By not including Muslim women in the discussion of Muslim women, mainstream Western media is reinscribing them as passive and voiceless. Increasingly, young Muslims have become vocal in public spheres about the lopsided

representation of Islam in mainstream Western media. They have sought to combat the images of Islam as foreign, oppressive, and threatening by highlighting their Western-ness, hoping to provide a more balanced and accurate view of Muslims in the West. Muslim women have been on the frontline of this battle for new images of Muslims in the West, mainly because they possess the most powerful and visible symbol in Islam, the hijab (Mishra & Shirazi 2010, p. 204). These women have taken to the physical and virtual streets to show that they are not threats to society nor are they passive victims of their culture.

### 3.2 Muslim Women on YouTube

I have chosen YouTube as my site of inquiry to examine how Muslim women are providing alternative images because the audio and visual components, as well as the potential for immediate textual feedback available on the website provides a level of closeness between the producer and consumer that collapses traditional media boundaries. Viewers have a greater stake and say in how these new subjectivities are created and articulated on YouTube. Much of the work written on the role of YouTube in facilitating the construction of Muslim women identities has focused on reactionary videos, in which a large group of Muslim women respond to a major Islamophobic event. In these instances, the videos were posted by ‘one hit wonders’, people who had one or two videos with several thousand views, but did not have a consistent viewer base or much interaction with their audience. In essence, these posters had little social capital within the Islamic YouTube community, making it difficult to determine their impact on shifting discourse.

Farida Vis et al. (2011) examined how women responded to Geerts Wilder’s video, *Fitna*, which depicted Islam as inherently violent and misogynistic. Using a qualitative and quantitative approach, the authors explored how Muslim women provided alternative discourses on gender and Islam through creating *Fitna* response videos. The authors argue that YouTube offers an alternative and important space for women to contest stereotypical images of Muslim women and to create new, liberated subjectivities. Vis et al. (2011) found that Muslim women users sought to create a new image of Muslim womanhood that separated her from modest clothing, was an insider to Western culture, opinionated, and capable of providing her own interpretations of Islam. This was accomplished by appearing in videos unveiled, filming in mundane settings, and reading Quranic verses in a public setting, which is often reserved for Muslim men. Van Zoonen et al. (2011, p. 1296) also examined the Geerts Wilder controversy and found that while the *Fitna* response videos might have disrupted Wilder’s message, there was little communication between content creators and their audience. This raises important questions about how this momentum can be maintained in order to help permanently shift discourses.

In Bouclin's (2013) piece on YouTube response videos to *Major Canadian Airline Risks Your Safety, Pandering to Muslim Sensibilities* in which the Canadian government was accused of putting the religious choices of the Muslim minority over the national security interests of Canada. Again, we see Muslim women being characterized as the perpetual other and a violent threat to the West. The author uses a 'critical' legal pluralism to explore how Muslim women and their allies use YouTube to contest the victim/threat discourse and create new representations of veiled women. These new representations feature opinionated women actively engaging in Islamic legal scholarship to craft their own interpretations of the Qur'an.

I hope to add to this discussion by providing a close reading of two vloggers, instead of a large-scale study, in order to determine how YouTube enables Muslim women living in the West to form new subjectivities that challenge mainstream Western and conservative Muslim views of women. Here, I am interested not in specific moments of time, but movement by two particular people and their audience. I recognize that it is potentially problematic to focus attention away from the Middle East, where Islam was founded and plays a major role in politics, to the West, which is already privileged in discourses on religion. However, Muslim women living in the West, far away from traditional Muslim institutions of learning, face a unique challenge that their Arab counterparts do not, as they seek to balance their Muslim and Western identities.

#### 4 Theory

Vernacular discourse is described as speech and culture that includes music, art, fashion, and dance, which resonates within a local community (Ono & Sloop 1995, 20). Focusing on how marginalized people use vernacular discourse in mediated spaces, such as YouTube, as a political tool in order to construct new subjectivities, Guo and Lee (2013) extend Ono and Sloop's (1995) framework of vernacular discourse in which they focused on analyzing content and agency. Guo and Lee (2013, p. 394) argue that new subjectivities for marginalized people, which often contest mainstream stereotypical images, are created through the use of hybrid vernacular discourse in which cultural references, humor, and identification are employed. Both Ono and Sloop (1995) and Guo and Lee (2013) argue for a hybrid analysis of vernacular discourse, which recognizes that the boundaries between vernacular and mainstream discourses are blurred. By recognizing this hybridity, scholars can avoid essentializing the vernacular and making it in complete opposition from the mainstream; the two discourses exchange and are constantly rearticulated and renegotiated. I would push further and argue that by using this framework, scholars are able to see how people simultaneously operate

in multiple hybrid communities, recognizing that experiences vary based on race, religion, class, sexuality, and country of origin.

#### 4.1 Content

Central to hybrid vernacular discourse is cultural syncretism in which marginalized groups both challenge how they are represented by hegemonic powers and affirm identities constructed within their local communities (Guo & Lee 2013, p. 396). In essence, they are simultaneously talking to their oppressors and with each other. A second component to this discourse is pastiche, in which people from marginalized communities borrow from popular culture without mimicking it (Ono & Sloop 1995, p. 23). They take pieces from popular culture and make it their own, similar to sampling in or remixing in hip hop music (Ono & Sloop 1995, p. 23).

#### 4.2 Agency

For this paper I will be using Guo and Lee's (2013, p. 396) definition of agency, which they define as "the capacity of an agent (a person or an entity) to act in the world of YouTube". I recognize that I am limited in what I can say about agency because this piece focuses on content, rather than content production and producers. However, I believe that I can begin to ask questions. The authors argue that there are two forms of agency that both enable and constrain hybrid vernacular discourse on the website: YouTube as an institution and the individual producer. YouTube is a multi-billion dollar for-profit organization. They are in the business of making money. One such way they have ensured this is through establishing a YouTube partnership program in which users are paid by how popular the original content videos are (Guo & Lee 2013, 396). YouTube partnerships give vloggers a financial motivation to produce videos that will help them both gain and maintain their audience base. This might be accomplished by producing funny, entertaining videos and limiting the number of videos that discuss controversial topics within some Muslim communities, such as LGBT rights and polygamy. As such, the most popular Islamic vloggers, like Khan and Armstrong espouse a mainstream version of Sunni Islam. In instances in which serious issues are discussed, a common strategy to temper the situation is to use humor, often through skits, cartoons, and pictures (Guo & Lee 2013, 396).

When requested, Khan and Armstrong will provide their opinions on a specific issue, but they usually preface their videos by stating that they are not knowledgeable enough to provide a legal opinion and that concerned users should seek out a qualified scholar in order to get the proper guidance. They always refer their users to male scholars, following mainstream Sunni views in which men are seen as the main gatekeepers to Islamic knowledge. As a businesswoman with



successful online companies, this is a strategic move. By avoiding giving their opinion on highly contested issues, Khan and Armstrong ensure that they don't offend any of their potential customers. This does not mean, however, that the two vloggers never discuss sensitive issues, rather they highlight the fact that they speak as an individual, not a representative for Islam as a religious institution. YouTube should not be understood as a separate sphere with no connection to the "real" world. Social and cultural norms from the physical world are carried over into the virtual world and can constrain a vlogger. One such social constraint is gender. While they are seeking to educate Muslims and non-Muslims on Islam, they Khan and Armstrong have to operate in a specific framework through which gender roles are understood.

### 4.3 Subjectivity

YouTube provides Muslim women with the opportunity to use hybrid vernacular to deconstruct boundaries established by mainstream media and conservative Muslims. One such boundary is Muslim/Western, which implies that people must choose between these two identities. Focusing on hybrid vernacular allows scholars to observe how Muslim women are cutting across race, gender, and religion to create new discourses.

### 4.4 Audience

I hope to further the hybrid vernacular discourse framework by adding an additional point of analysis: audience response. Ono and Sloop (1995, p. 26) argue that vernacular discourse highlights possible realities for marginalized communities. The role of the audience is to approve of their potentiality. As YouTube is a space of interaction, it is important to see how viewers are responding to the subjectivities created by these vloggers. The audience plays a role in the flow of media (Jenkins 2013, p. 2). Since producers are paid by the number of video views, it would follow that they would pay attention to how their viewers respond to their content and make changes accordingly. By examining user feedback through comments, researchers can see how successful a speaker is with engaging in hybrid vernacular discourse.

## 5 Methodology

In what follows, I will provide a textual analysis of videos produced by two Islamic women vloggers, Amena Khan and Nye Armstrong who create advice, fashion tutorials, and lifestyle vlogs.

---

I examined videos that addressed issues surrounding gender, conversion, race, nationality, and stereotypes. I watched 30 videos from each vlogger, making a total of 60 videos viewed, some were as short as 31 seconds while others were close to 12 minutes long. From there, I chose three videos from each vlogger for a total of six to examine. These six videos are exemplars of the themes that will be discussed below. Using the Guo and Lee's framework of hybrid vernacular discourse I explored the ways in which Armstrong and Khan simultaneously challenge mainstream views of Islam as wholly other and incompatible with Western culture and Muslim women as passive and oppressed by their male counterparts, while creating new subjectivities. I will also explore ways in which their subjectivities are constrained by institutional and social norms.

### 5.1 Amena

Amena Khan, who goes by the username, Amenakin, is the most popular Islamic vlogger, with over 154,000 subscribers and nearly 26,000,000 combined video views. Khan is a Muslim-born British-Indian woman in her early thirties. She is married and has two young children, who never appear in her videos in order to protect their right to privacy. Her husband appears in a number of her humorous videos, such as the "Husband Tag" and "My Husband Does My Makeup Blindfolded". A former science teacher, Khan is the founder and owner of Pearl Daisy, an online Islamic clothing store. She started her business after a number of her viewers asked if they could buy one of her handmade scarfs, which she calls hoojabs, a combination of a scarf and a hood. The vlogger also writes for a number of Muslim websites including, *Aquila Style*. The majority of her videos involve fashion with hoojab, hijab, and makeup tutorials as well as featured outfit of the days.

Khan usually starts with "As 'salaam ailkum ladies," a common Muslim phrase, marking her imagined community constructed of Muslim women. However, she has a large following of non-Muslim women interested in dressing modestly and Islam. In fact Nye Armstrong, the second vlogger featured in this piece used Khan as a resource before she converted to Islam and continued watching after her conversion when she began to wear the hijab. Since Armstrong first subscribed to Khan's channel, the two have collaborated together on a number of videos and they have become offline friends. Collaboration is a common practice among popular vloggers as it allows for additional visibility and helps promote a strong sense of community (Burgess & Green 2009, p. 98).

### 5.2 Nye Armstrong

Nye Armstrong is a white Muslim convert in her late 20s. Her family is of English descent, but she was born and currently lives in Connecticut in the United States. She joined YouTube in 2010 shortly after converting to Islam in order to document her journey as well as provide helpful tips to

fellow new Muslims. The majority of her videos provide practical tips for navigating as a religious minority both within one's family and community, such as teaching users how to properly pray, where to find religious resources, and how to "come out" as Muslim to one's family members. As her relationship with Khan has grown, Armstrong has begun to post fashion videos such as makeup tips and hijab tutorials. She has a much smaller audience base than Khan. As she has abandoned her old YouTube channel and created a new channel, I am unable to ascertain how many subscribers she has. Combining both channels, she has over 2,000,000 total video views. Despite the low views, she is one of the most popular converts within the Islamic YouTube community. Armstrong holds a position within Khan's company as Marketing Manager and posts weekly to the company's blog. Additionally she owns and operates a graphic design, called Andirun Designs.

## 6 Findings

In their videos, Khan and Armstrong often use humor and remixing, to create new images of Muslim womanhood. Their very presence as hijab-wearing Muslim women in a semi-public setting is of note because it challenges assumptions that Muslim women are passive and voiceless subjects. The vloggers have established a hybrid vernacular subjectivity by crossing the borders between race, religion, and nationality. Neither woman is of Arab descent; Khan is a mixed race Indian and Armstrong is white. A common stereotype of Muslims is that they are all from the Middle East (Bullock & Jafri 2000, p. 35). The two vloggers highlight the racial and ethnic diversity within Islam and challenge the idea of what a Muslim is supposed to look like. Khan's British accent and Armstrong's American accent disrupt the notion that Muslim is synonymous with foreign. They both reference cultural artifacts familiar to their audience members, discussing current events in their country, using Islamic terms, and making pop culture references. Furthermore, while both vloggers dress modestly and wear a hijab, they wear colorful, fashionable, Western-inspired clothes with high heel shoes, makeup and jewelry, challenging the assumptions of what constitutes as modest dress and behavior for Muslim women.

## 7 Challenge and Reconstruction

### ***Remixing: Fully Muslim and Western***

Both women share a love of the *Star wars* series produced by George Lucas. Khan's username, Amenakin, is a play on her favorite character from the franchise, Anakin Skywalker. In her fourth

most popular video with over 525,000 views, *Amenakin trailer* (2013), Khan shows how she is able to seamlessly cross the boundaries between vernacular and mainstream discourse. The video acts as an advertisement for her YouTube channel and her online clothing business, as well as an introduction to her new audience members. *Amenakin trailer* (2013) is in a cartoon format, which was produced by Armstrong. It chronicles Khan's journey to becoming a successful vlogger as well as a more observant Muslim. The opening scene is a cartoon version of a hijab-clad Khan with a purple light saver, a tip of the hat to her user name and her favorite Star Wars character. Next, we see her as an uncovered science teacher with blue hair, which challenges the viewer to broaden their image of what a Muslim woman looks like. We hear her catchy jingle as the video progresses. Notable lyrics include, "The force was strong, so she carried on" and "Come take a twirl with an intergalactic girl," which mark her as a *Star wars* fan (*Amenakin trailer* 2013). These lyrics are accompanied by a quote from Rumi, one of her favorite Sufi mystics, marking her as a Muslim. The video continues as Khan meets her husband, gets married, and has her first child, the event that motivated her to post her first video to YouTube. It ends with cartoon *Amenakin* being transformed into a human image, smiling confidently into the camera. This short video highlights how Muslim women living in the West seek to find a middle ground between their two identities. Khan shows the varying levels of expression of faith; there is no one right way to be a Muslim. We see images of her with uncovered blue hair in tight skinny jeans, as well as her in a hijab and loose fitting clothes. Both versions are equally Muslim, just with different forms of personal expression. This challenges the notion that religiosity is dictated by clothing, rather than right belief and practice.

Most of the recent comments on the video are negative, as it has appeared as an advertisement on a number of other videos and channels. Disgruntled viewers commented on how annoying the tune was and how out-of-place the advertisement felt—they were not interested in hearing from Muslim women. However, earlier comments are more telling of audience reaction. One commenter left, "Star War references!! haha your husband is blessed with the coolest wife ever. mA [look at what Allah has blessed you with]" (*Amenakin trailer* 2013). Another user posted:

Love the cartoon approach, so cute." An even more glowing post reads, "U really are an intergalactic woman and an awe inspiring one as well :) I love u, u made me more closer to my religion, its been 2 years of me doing my Hijab and u were also my inspiration :) keep moving forward and keep paying forward :) Love and Peace (*Amenakin trailer* 2013).

These comments show that Khan is picking up on an anxiety found among many Western Muslim women, who are seeking to find a space for themselves between identities that are often pitted against each other. They also highlight the importance for many women to find a community of likeminded people, which might be hard in areas where the Muslim population is small.

*Princess Leia hijab tutorial* (2011), by Armstrong, explains how to tie a *hijab* in a style similar Princess Leia's famous buns in the *Star wars* franchise. This is one of her most popular videos with over 66,000 views since its posting in 2011. In a sea of *hijab* tutorials on YouTube, the *Princess Leia hijab tutorial* (2011) stands out for its creativity and unique sense of humor. The vlogger writes in the video description box, "My love for Star Wars has inspired this hijab tutorial. I also have an obsession with Light Sabers. Yeah, I am a dork" (*Princess Leia hijab tutorial* 2011). Armstrong imagines that her hijab style could be worn at a wedding, but it would also fit in at a Comic Convention and at a Halloween party. She starts the video with the traditional Muslim greeting, "As 'salaam ailkum", signifying her status as a Muslim and marking her imagined audience as Muslims. In the background, we can see a verse from the Qur'an, hanging on the wall, further establishing herself as a Muslim. The dialogue in this video is limited, although Armstrong does leave room to quote line from the popular American comedy series, *30 rock*. Typically, hijab tutorials do not feature much dialogue, so to lighten the mood of the video Armstrong added bloopers, including her mimicking Khan, and scenes with her using a pink light saver. Entertaining videos tend to get more views, but Armstrong's video was doing important work. The video is a perfect example of the desire of many American Muslims, especially converts, who seek to display their American and Muslim identity, creating a unique middle ground, or third space, where the two identities can meet and overlap. Armstrong shows that there is a permissible way to be both a Muslim who abides by rules of modesty and American; they are not competing identities. Her video contests hegemonic assumptions made by Muslims over what it means to dress modestly. Armstrong puts her own unique flair to covering, challenging the desire to mimic Arab styles of head wraps, such as the hijab. Through her tutorial she transforms the hijab from a religious requirement to a means of self-expression.

The vast majority of the audience response was positive, with 632 up votes and 53 down votes. One viewer wrote, "Sister Nye, you are amazing, such an inspiration and so entertaining. I feel like I already know you. Thank you for your videos" (*Princess Leia hijab tutorial* 2011). Another commenter left, "yaaay for muslim nerd girls ☺ we do exist [and] we are AWESOME. Seriously me her could be bff's" (*Princess Leia hijab tutorial* 2011). Like Khan, Armstrong is affirming the identities that are not represented in the mainstream. In this case, it is the nerdy Muslimah who likes to cos-play. These comments highlight Armstrong's ability to build affinity with her audience and points out that finding a middle ground between Islam and Western culture is also a concern of her viewers. The vlogger's appeal extends beyond Muslims. Her video has appeared on *Buzzfeed*, *Huffington Post*, and the *Daily Mail*. Armstrong shows non-Muslims that Muslims are not only fun, but capable of embracing their American culture. One non-Muslim viewer commented, "How did I get here? Anyway, I'm not really into religion but I thought this was really neat. [This is] definitely unique for a hijab, if I'm allowed to say that" (*Princess Leia hijab*

*tutorial* 2011). Another non-Muslim posted, “Best tutorial ever! You’re such a cutie pie. Dorky girls unite! I’m not Muslim, but if I was, I would definitely use your tutorial” (*Princess Leia hijab tutorial* 2011). The vlogger’s quirky personality helps her build her audience base both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The video helps to break down assumptions of what it means to be Muslim and allows for a relatively safe place for dialogue and interaction.

### 7.1 Assertive and Independent

Muslim woman vloggers, like Khan and Armstrong, appear to be assertive and independent subjects, a far cry from the stereotypical submissive Muslim women that are often portrayed in the media. By presenting their views on Islam, even in instances in which they are affirming more conservative interpretations of Islam, in a semi-public space, Khan and Armstrong are showing both non-Muslims and conservative Muslims that women are capable of practicing their faith properly without losing their voice in the public sphere.

As the owner of a successful Islamic clothing store, many of Khan’s video addresses concerns over dressing modestly. In these videos she is speaking to at least three different groups of people: Muslim women who cover out of personal choice, non-Muslims who think that Islam oppresses women, and conservative Muslims who do believe that women should not speak in the public sphere. In her video, *Niqab ban* (2013), Khan discusses the calls made by some members of the British Parliament to ban the niqab in the public setting in an attempt to promote security. Khan highlights their Britishness through using logical arguments and calling upon to recognize that the cornerstone of British culture is free choice. The vlogger begins the video by challenging the notion that Muslim women are oppressed by the men in their religion. Khan states that Muslim women are capable of making their own decisions as to how to dress and behave in public. She argues that banning the niqab will lead to a slippery slope, which will eventually lead the government to make the next logical step and ban all religious symbols, such as yarmulkes, turbans, and crosses. Khan points out that Muslims are reasonable; they know when wearing the niqab is inappropriate in certain situations, such as while testifying in court, teaching, and in airports. For British Muslims, civil duty trumps religious identity. Furthermore, she argues that the discourse on Muslim women must include their voices. She states, “Everybody will come and talk about how the Muslim woman feels what position she’s in. What she’s going through, her opinions, her thoughts. Everybody is consulted about the Muslim woman except for the Muslim woman” (*Niqab ban*, 2013). This provides a critique liberal Western politics that seeks to ‘liberate’ Muslim women while ignoring their opinions, especially when their views do not align. For Amenakin, wearing the hijab and its variants is viewed as an agentic choice and a matter of self-expression.

As this video is nearly three years old, much of the new commentary involves flaming from non-Muslims, who claim that all religions are false and Islam is the worst of the bunch. However, many users took a sympathetic approach. While disagreeing with a woman's decision to wear the niqab or hijab they recognized that it was an inherent right as a British citizen. One poster left:

I think you explained this really well. I'm an atheist/antitheist so I obviously personally disagree with niqab, hijab etc but I absolutely think, as long as there are those comment sense things in place that you mentioned, everyone should be able to wear whatever they want and express their identity (*Niqab ban*, 2013).

Many believed that banning the niqab was a form of discrimination and actually oppressed Muslim women. Another user wrote:

It's a form of oppression, we are stopping her from practicing her belief, she chooses to wear the veil and no one has forced it upon her...it's her Choice full stop end of, the Western Governments should stop being the Big brother and mind their own business, they didn't care a toss what Muslim women wore before 9/11 (*Niqab ban*, 2013).

The user argues that the focus on the hijab is out of fear of terrorism, rather than a desire to liberate Muslim women. Interestingly, in these early comments, even when the viewers disagreed with each other or openly criticized their home governments, the conversations remained civil. Furthermore, while most people did not support the niqab, they found the government's focus on Muslim women following 9/11 to be problematic and 'un-British'.

In Armstrong's video, *Feminism vs Islam* (2011), she seeks to show that these two concepts are not incompatible. Filming the video with fellow Muslim convert and featured guest, Rebecca, Armstrong establishes a casual and conversational tone with her audience about a weighty issue. She begins the video by stating, "Ever since I started wearing hijab, I've become more of a feminist...a more sort of on a crusade for women" (*Feminism vs Islam* 2011). Like the title of her video, one could easily argue that Armstrong began her video with this statement to draw her audience in. The use of the word crusade stands out in a post-9/11 setting, as it is often accompanied in conversations of violent jihad by Islamists. She reclaims the term crusade, giving it a positive connotation. Taken aback by her statement, Rebecca pushes Armstrong to expand her argument. To which Armstrong replies with her definition of a feminist, "A women being empowered to herself... to the root of her nature" (*Feminism vs Islam* 2011). Armstrong emphasizes that while wearing the hijab is a religious obligation, it is also a choice that each Muslim woman must make for herself. Furthermore for Armstrong, the hijab gives her the power to avert the male gaze, reserving her beauty and sexuality for her husband. She continues that by stating that feminism is concerned

about “Getting to the essence of what makes a woman a woman” (*Feminism vs Islam* 2011).

Armstrong recognizes that some conservative interpretations of Islam produce strict gender roles or acceptable behavior of the genders, but she does not see these gender distinctions as an impediment to success in the public sphere, pointing out that many women have reached the top of their careers by wearing the hijab and highlight their feminine qualities. While the video focuses on the role of the hijab for Muslim women, Armstrong challenges her viewers to look beyond it, arguing that it provides a barrier for sexuality rather than a barrier to interacting with Muslim women.

This video was well received by both her Muslim and non-Muslim viewers. One commenter posted:

I do not, agree with islam... nor any other religion, but I do like this video. I love that you consider yourself empowered by having the freedom to make a choice; by understanding that other women do use their sexuality as a tool or muscle against men; and that you choose to keep that only for intimate moments. feminism would be beautiful if it was implemented by your understanding of it (*Feminism vs Islam* 2011).

Even her non-Muslim viewers were able to find a middle ground, while not believing in Islam; they could respect her right to her beliefs and practices. Another commenter left, “Both of you beautiful woman have really open my mind and truly have expressed the meaning of being a feminist” (*Feminism vs Islam* 2011). Many people seemed to find her definition that focused on choice, but upheld mainstream gender norms appealing. Armstrong is speaking for and to a group that is often ignored in mainstream liberal feminist discourse. Just as there is more than one right way to be a Muslim, there are multiple ways to be a feminist. It would be too simplistic to paint wearing the hijab as empowering, any more than it would be to call it oppressive. Instead, we must draw our attention to the fact that people are making agentic choices, through a process of interpretation and dialogue.

## 7.2 Upholding the Mainstream

While Khan and Armstrong’s goal might not be to entertain their viewers by filming pranks or food challenges, they still need to maintain their audience base. Many vloggers will employ YouTube’s production of logic by periodically creating funny and entertaining videos instead of only posting videos that discuss serious social issues (Guo & Lee 2013, p. 402). As YouTube partners, they have to produce popular videos to attract advertisers and thus, revenue for themselves (Guo & Lee 2013, p. 402). This potentially constrains their agency and forces them to choose to uphold some stereotypes as a matter of financial survival. Yet without having interviewed Khan or Armstrong, we



cannot draw any firm conclusions. In her video, *How to not touch men* (2013), Khan provides practical tips to avoiding physical contact with men outside of one's family, which can be hard to maintain when living in a country that puts an emphasis on touch. According to her interpretation of Islamic texts, avoiding physical contact with the opposite gender is crucial to maintaining one's modesty. She gets her point across through a skit featuring her husband and one of her sisters. Khan runs through different scenarios that a Muslim woman might encounter and the absurd strategies some women might employ to prevent physical contact, such as sneezing, bowing, and permanently carrying objects in one's hands. In one scene she avoids a hug from a distant relative, an overly expressive 'uncle' with a thick North Indian accent and intricately shaped mustache. She then is then punished by her Urdu-speaking mother who grabs her ear and drags her out of the scene. The video ends with Amenakin exhorting women to stand up for their right to practice their religion freely, which includes avoiding contact with other people.

This was one of Khan's most contested videos, yet none of the commenters took issue with the skit itself, perhaps because the overly touchy uncle and the controlling mother seem familiar to her viewers, so they are less likely to be offended by it. However, by featuring these two caricatures, Khan is recasting South Asians as perpetual others. These stereotypes are also recognizable to many non-Muslims. Since Khan's audience is virtually unlimited, there is no way for her to predict who is watching the video and what they'll take from the video. This might give some non-South Asian people permission to perpetuate these stereotypes.

Many took issue with the notion that physical contact with people of the opposite gender outside of the family is haram, or forbidden. They argued a rather conservative view of Islam, one that many of the audience members did not agree with. Commenters pointed out their identity as Muslims, providing them with authority to speak on the topic, as well as challenging her right to speak on behalf of Islam, something that Khan tries to avoid. One commenter left, "iam moslim and i shake hands.. hallo there is nothing wrong with that" (*How to not touch men* 2013). Another Muslim challenged her interpretation of modesty, pointing out that the Qur'an does not specifically say that people of the opposite gender are not allowed to have physical contact with each other. They wrote:

Well as a muslim I follow the quran not the culture of a prophet and things he did that were actually written 200 years after his death so.. something tells me tha might not be quite accurate and im preetty sure god would have included in the quran js and not say u speak on behalf of all muslims.. u don't (*How to not touch men* 2013).

This user places avoiding physical contact within in Muslim-dominant cultures, rather than in Islam, meaning Muslim should change how they relate to other people based on the setting. Another

commenter argues that avoiding shaking someone's hand is taboo in Western culture and would be seen as disrespectful, writing, "I'm muslima and i don't agree with you hun! if you don't shake hand with any body that would be so rude and it look like you don't respect others!" (How to not touch men 2013). From this comment we can see that for some Muslims, following the social norms of their home country in order to appear to be less different is more important than abiding by strict rules of Islamic conduct.

These exchanges highlight the angst among many Muslims living in the West as how to best 'fit in' as well as the diversity in approaches to achieving that goal. Because Khan prefaces her statements by saying that she is not a religious scholar and her views represent her own individual interpretation, she does not disclose the possibility that there are multiple correct ways to interact with people of a different gender. Since Khan and her audience are on equal footing in terms of authority, we are able to see the process of interpretation, articulation, and criticism that many Muslims engage in before making moral claims.

In a video called, *What men want* (2013) Armstrong describes what she learned after taking a marriage counseling class and then confirms these lessons based on her own experiences. Armstrong lists the top qualities that a man is looking for in a wife including being a good cook, having respect for a husband's family, being attentive, and dressing attractively. Because her audience is primarily comprised of Muslim women, she does not tell the viewers what women look for in a husband. "If you want to be a good wife know how to cook...men are just that simple apparently. And if you want to piss off a husband, don't cook. Trust me, I know" (*What men want* 2013). Armstrong essentializes biological sex differences, making it clear that women and men are inherently different. By doing so, she perpetuates patriarchal interpretations of Islam created by male scholars in which women are expected to maintain the household while the husband provides financially for both her and their family. These views can result in women being placed in a passive position.

Many of her viewers took issue with her views on marriage, pointing out these were unrealistic expectations to meet. One person wrote:

[S]o, be a Barbie doll, prepare a banquet every night, and be nice and polite to the in laws and you are set for life! I'm average at all three... But my husband loves me anyway mashallah, and inshallah I can improve in this and other aspects of my character that need some attention" (*What men want* 2013).

Another user left, "its funny that intellect was not on the top of that list!!!" (*What men want* 2013). Others were also troubled by the fact that she did not include an overview of what a perfect husband is. Since her audience is mainly made of converts, it is quite possible that Armstrong's video would

have been one of their few opportunities to learn about the rights that Islam affords to wives. Other viewers also used the space to exchange more tips to finding the right husband. While it would be easy to write this off as a simple regurgitation of patriarchal gender norms, it is important to note that Armstrong has opened up a space for the audience to debate over what it means to be a good Muslim wife. YouTube provides Armstrong and her audience with a safe space to speak on topics reserved for Muslim men. This is important, even if her audience is reaffirming traditional norms.

## 8 Conclusion

YouTube has provided a space for Muslim women to create new images of Muslim womanhood. In the place of images of passive victims of their religion that mainstream Western, Muslim Islamic vloggers have created new images of themselves as fully Western and Muslim, assertive, and opinionated. While they might not be pushing too far past conservative views of Muslim womanhood, their presence in a semi-public setting is important to de-othering Islam and helps us begin to understand how YouTube can intersect at playful and political.

These vloggers are creating room for dialogue in which members of the local community affirm and contest the images and subjectivities that they create for themselves. Since very few of their videos are marked as private, Khan and Armstrong provide non-Muslims to ‘confront the other’ in a relatively safe and anonymous. While not addressed in this paper, the ability to remain anonymous could result in flaming, especially when discussing highly contested topics, such as gender relations. It appears that their audience, both Muslim and non-Muslim are generally accepting of their new subjectivities. However, many commenters seem to focus more on the vloggers’ appearance, expressing how attractive they are, rather than providing feedback on their content. Resistance was only felt when the audience believed that the vloggers were crossing the boundary between personal opinion and religious advice. It is of note that much of the audience protest came when Khan and Armstrong aligned their views too closely to more conservative interpretations of gender and gender relations, which can be found in *How to not touch men* (2013) and *What men want* (2013). For many of their audience members the scale for Muslim and Western was uneven, with the vloggers favoring Muslimness while the audience hoped for more of a Western orientation. Interestingly, in these instances, their users established their own status as a Muslims and thus capable of criticizing the vloggers. These videos, coupled with their comments, highlight the diversity of thought and expression within Islam and play an important role in deconstructing the Muslim other. Furthermore, they show us that identities are in a constant process of negotiation and rearticulation that is dependent on one’s positionality.

## Internet Sources

Amenakin 2013, *Amenakin trailer*, online video, viewed 6 April 2014, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Im3LMp0mnoQ>>.

Amenakin 2013, *How to not touch men*, online video, viewed 1 May 2014, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3y-1RMRn\\_vA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3y-1RMRn_vA)>.

Amenakin 2013, *Niqab ban*, online video, viewed 1 April 2014, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqCRcCxU\\_BE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqCRcCxU_BE)>.

Nye's Old Channel 2011, *Princess Leia hijab tutorial*, online video, viewed 3 April 2014, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhOGM2rdqKl>>.

Nye Armstrong 2013, *What men want*, online video, viewed 1 May 2014, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kLmGx\\_YDZ2k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kLmGx_YDZ2k)>.

Nye's Old Channel 2011, *Feminism vs Islam*, online video, viewed 8 April 2014, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4EFISeHIIY4>>.

## Bibliography

Bouclin, S 2013, 'YouTube and Muslim women's legal subjectivities', *Onati Socio-Legal Series*, vol. 3, no. 7, pp. 1158-1183.

Bullock, H & Jafri, GJ 2000, 'Media (mis)representations: Muslim women in the Canadian nation', *Canadian Woman Studies*, vol. 20 no. 2, pp. 34-40.

Burgess, J & Green, J 2009, *YouTube: online video participatory culture*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Guo, L & Lee, L 2013, 'The critique of YouTube-based vernacular discourse: a case study of YouTube's Asian community', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 50, no. 5, pp. 391-406.

Falah, GW 2005, 'The visual representation of Muslim women/Arab women in daily newspapers in the United States', in GW Falah and CR Nagel (eds), *Geographies of Muslim women: gender, religion, and space*, The Guilford Press, New York, pp. 300-320.

Haddad, YY 2011, *Becoming American: the forging of Arab and Muslim identity in pluralist America*, Baylor University Press, Waco, Texas.

Jenkins, H 2013, *Spreadable media: creating value and meaning in a networked culture*, New York University Press, New York.

Khabeer, SA 2007, 'Rep that Islam 1: rhyme and reason of American Islamic hip hop', *The Muslim World*, vol. 97, no. 1, pp. 125-141.

Lange, PG 2009, 'Videos of affinity on YouTube', in P Snickars and P Vonderau (eds), *The YouTube Reader*, National Library of Sweden, Stockholm 2009), pp. 70-88.

Lewis, B 2001, *The Muslim discovery of Europe*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York.

MacDonald, M 2006, 'Muslim women and the veil: problems of image and voice in media representations', *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 7-22.

Mishra, S & Shirazi, F 2010, 'Hybrid identities: American Muslim women speak', *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 191-209.

Mitra, A 2004, 'Voices of the marginalized on the Internet: examples from a website for women of South Asia', *Journal of Communication*, vol. 54 no. 3, pp. 492-510.

Ono, KA Sloop, JM 1995, 'The critique of vernacular discourse', *Communication Monographs*, vol. 62, pp. 19-46.

Van Zoonen, L, Vis, F, & Mihelj, S 2011, 'YouTube interactions between agonism, antagonism and dialogue: video responses to the anti-Islam film *Fitna*', *New Media and Society*, vol. 13, no. 8, pp. 1283-1300.

Vis, F, van Zoonen, L, & Milhelj, S 2011, 'Women responding to the anti-Islam film *Fitna*: voices and acts of citizenship on YouTube', *Feminist Review*, vol. 97, no. 1, pp. 110-129.

### Biographical Note

KAYLA RENÉE WHEELER is a PhD student at the Department of Religious at the University of Iowa. Her research explores how Black American Muslim women use social media to transmit religion and culture and the implications that that has for constructing authority. She has published pieces on religion and gender and Black Christianity.

Kayla Wheeler  
314 Gilmore Hall,  
Iowa City, IA, 52242  
[kayla-wheeler@uiowa.edu](mailto:kayla-wheeler@uiowa.edu)

## I 'like' my Patriarch. Religion on Facebook

### New Forms of Religiosity in Contemporary Georgia

Sophie Zviadadze

#### Abstract

Rising of religiousness is a significant characteristic of Georgian society in post-communistic period. Revitalization of religion is vivid as on individual (increased amount of religious people) as well as on institutional (increased role and authority of the Church) level.

Increased religiosity is manifested not only in a traditional form of piety (church attendness, observance of rituals), but also in expression of religion in new media (preaches of clerics on youtube, church bell as ringtones in mobile phone, picture of church as desktop photos). How is religion transferred on facebook? Is facebook a kind of space of public religiosity in contemporary Georgia?

According to recent studies facebook is Georgia's most popular Internet platform. Facebook is a space, where people most widely and frequently discuss religious issues, whether it is orthodox religious opinions or critical understanding of religion. Most frequently users of facebook are young people. The paper seeks to understand how religion is present on facebook and how young people affiliate with religious issues. The paper deals with the question if "religious face" on facebook correlates with religious identity in life. Therefore the aim of proposed paper is to explore new tendencies of religiosity of young people, what kind of influence does religion have on facebook in construction of identity.

Generally, the paper will try to explore the new forms of religiousness (for example asking forgiveness publicly on facebook on "day of forgiveness") - is it performance of traditional religion through new medium or are we dealing with profanation of religion?

#### Keywords

Religion in Georgia, secularization, popular religion, religion on facebook, identity of young people

## 1 Introduction

Rising of religiousness is a significant characteristic of Georgian society in post-communistic period. Revitalization of religion is vivid as on individual (increased amount of religious people) as well as on institutional (increased role and authority of the Church) level.

Increased religiosity is manifested not only in a traditional form of piety (church attendance, observance of rituals), but also in expression of religion in new media (preaches of clerics on YouTube, church bell as ringtones in mobile phone, picture of church as desktop photos, discussion religious issues on social networks). The aim of this paper is to discuss how religion is transferred on facebook. Generally, the paper will try to explore the new forms of religiousness (for example asking forgiveness publicly on facebook on “day of forgiveness”) Is facebook a kind of space of public religiosity in contemporary Georgia, is it performance of traditional religion through new medium or is it an arena of de-sacralization of religion?

According to recent studies facebook is Georgia's most popular Internet platform.<sup>1</sup> Facebook in Georgia is a space of discussion and socialization. It is a space, where people most widely and frequently discuss religious issues, whether it is orthodox religious opinions or critical understanding of religion. It can be assumed that this new media changes the forms and usage of religious symbols, religious thoughts of modern people (transformation religious identity of Georgians goes beyond just sharing photos of priests and religious quotations). Facebook as social media, which in addition to allowing connecting people, creates new forms of communication and new rules of behavior. The paper deals with the question if “religious face” on facebook correlates with religious identity in life.

Most frequent users of facebook are young people. The paper seeks to understand how religion is present on facebook and how young people affiliate with religious issues. Therefore the aim of proposed paper is to explore new tendencies of religiosity of young people. Researching the quality of religiosity and its forms among the young users of social networks allows for studying the impact of the modern new media on identity embraced by the youth, as well as determining the forms of this impact on their identity, a space for religion on their facebook and more generally, addressing the question of whether the social network supports religious or secular thinking, in other words, whether the facebook supports the process of individualization therefore acting as a precondition for secularization.

In order to discuss the specifics of expression of religion in the social network and identify correlation between the religious identity and facebook identity among the youth based on

---

1 Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC): The Caucasus Barometer, Tbilisi, 2012.

Georgia's case, the paper provides a brief overview of some key theoretical frameworks and latest achievements in respective research.

## 2 Research Review – Religion in digital and post-secular age

### 2.1 „Religion goes public“

According to the classical paradigm of secularization, technical progress and modernization facilitate a secularization process (Wilson 1966, 1976).<sup>2</sup> It is true that the manifestation of secularism in Europe varies in forms and qualities (decline in traditional religiosity, privatization of religion, decrease in the number of churchgoers), however, it is also evident that religion is being established in its new form. Contemporary theories try to explain the *comeback of religion* (Riesebrodt 2001) in modern society. It can be assumed that, the return of religious is a kind of transformation of the forms of religiosity and it has never vanished.

New forms of religion and religiousness that emerged in modern (secular) societies led Luckmann to reflect on the changing role and function of religion in a modern society; Along the concept of invisible religion (Luckmann, 1963, 1993) and deinstitutionalization of religion (Gabriel 1996), there is now an actual paradigm “De-secularization of the World” (Berger 1999). Piter L. Berger (1999, 2) disagrees with the statement that ‘modernisation has had some secularizing effects, more in some places than in other. But it has also provoked powerful movements of counter secularization. Also secularization on the societal level is not necessarily linked to secularization on the level of individual consciousness. Certain religious institutions have lost power and influence in many societies, but both old and new religious beliefs and practices have nevertheless continued in the lives of individuals, sometimes taking new institutional forms and sometimes leading to great explosions of religious fervor’ (Berger, 1999, 3) and considers it a mistake of a theory of the secularism.

Modernization affects religion, but this is not a unilateral correlation, rather a complex relationship. Some religious individuals consider modernity as a looming threat while others accept it and try to find new forms of establishing themselves (cif. Berger 1999, 3). It was already in the beginning of 1960s when Luckmann started talking about the transformation of the forms of

---

2 “Industrialization brought with series of social changes – the fragmentation of the life-world, the decline of community, the rise of bureaucracy, technological consciousness – that together made Religion less arresting and less plausible than it had been in pre-modern societies”, Bruce, S 2002, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, p. 36.



religiosity (Luckmann 1963, 1993). A thesis of invisible religion (*Die Unsichtbare Religion*) indicates to the diminished role of institutional religion (a model of medieval church now belongs to the past), however, this does not mean that religion has faded away on an individual level. On the very contrary - individual spirituality is now evident. Besides, this subjective religiosity is syncretic and often represents a blend of individual and institutionalized religion. That is why we it cannot be asserted that institutional religion has gone and only individual religion has remained (cf. Berger, 1999, 4). However, individual religiosity is more apparent in the Western society with its diversity and vibrant development. 'Being 'spiritual but not religious' is one of the western phenomena' (Taylor 2007, 535).

Striving towards autonomy is one of the characteristics of a modern human (Luckmann 1993, 140). Therefore, a modern human being is trying to find new, individual forms of religiosity. Religion acquires new social form and the church is not a sole form, but one of many. This non-institutional 'invisible religion' stands close to Knoblauch's thesis of popular religion and (popular) spiritualism Both Luckmann and Knoblauch aim at identifying a form of expression and content of religiosity in modernity. Knoblauch argues that spiritualism is not an alternative to institutional religion or a counter concept (unlike Heelas and Woodhead 2005). He argues that spiritualism has become a part of secular and popular culture. Manifestation for popular religion and spiritualism can be considered as an incentive factor for transforming religion (Knoblauch 2009).

Religions have acquired new forms and have become increasingly influential actors in society in recent times.<sup>3</sup> The "trace" of religion can be found in political processes and cultural identity and values. More importantly, religion has become a major actor of public life.<sup>4</sup>

Having gone through a kind of adaptation in post modern society, religion is striving to embrace new spaces. Public discourse based on religious arguments has become more frequent and religious groups appear to have emerged in political and public arenas. The paradigm of secularism that gained momentum at the end of the 20th century holds that religion in 'postsecular' societies cannot be completely separated from the public discourse (Habermas 2001). Post-secular Europe means, as Taylor puts it, not devaluation of faith and religious practice, but the time 'in which the hegemony of the mainstream master narrative if secularization will be more and more challenged' (Taylor 2007, 534).

In his acclaimed work *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994) Casanova, building on Polish, Spanish, American and Brazilian experiences, illustrates the influences of religious groups

3 Luckmann, Th. 1963, *Das Problem der Religion in der modernen Gesellschaft. Institution, Person und Weltanschauung*, Rombach Freiburg, 1963; ib. 1993, *Die unsichtbare Religion*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M.

4 On the new wave of scientific debate see: Habermas, J 2001, *Glauben und Wissen*, Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels, viewed 1. August 2014. [http://www.friedenspreis-des-deutschen-buchhandels.de/sixcms/media.php/1290/2001\\_habermas.pdf](http://www.friedenspreis-des-deutschen-buchhandels.de/sixcms/media.php/1290/2001_habermas.pdf), Casanova, J 1994, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago; Taylor, C. 2007, *A secular age*, Belknap, Cambridge, Mass.

on broader public. Privatization of religion representing one of the aspects of classical secularism paradigm is the one most often questioned. Religion has become a part of the public space; hence, Casanova (1994) offers the thesis known as Deprivatization of Religion arguing that the public interest towards the church and religious issues has increased (Casanova 1994).

By deprivatization I mean the fact that religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them. (...) Similarly, religious institutions and organizations refuse to restrict themselves to the pastoral care of individual souls and continue to raise questions about the interconnections of private and public morality and to challenge the claims of the subsystems, particularly states and markets, to be exempt from extraneous normative consideration. This is what I call, for lack of a better term, the deprivatization of religion. (Casanova, 1994, p. 5f)

Casanova's view on deprivatization of religion can also fit a paradigm of religious transformation. As Casanova argues this is 'dual interrelated process' (Casanova 1996, 359). Namely, a modern (individual) form of religiosity is becoming increasingly public. Thus, religion 'goes' public.

The Internet, computer technologies and the new media are the means that have given a new image and rhythm to the modern society. New scientific achievements represent a process of rationalization bringing irrational and religious argumentation to question ever often. However, it is evident, that the same process supports deprivatization or transformation of religion as the new media technologies have become handy instruments for religion to promote missionary work, religious expression and self establishment while to individuals advanced technologies offer valuable resource for expressing religious identity and transferring religious practices to online dimension.

## 2.2 Popular religion

The Internet has introduced a new dimension in a human life. It has become a new place for socializing and as its popularity rises and the scale widens, so does its role in everyday life. 'Renaissance of Religion' and 'the return of religions' mentioned above affects not only offline public sphere but also online world. Although with a varying degree of skepticism yet the Internet has become a home for religious groups for missionary work, control and spiritual rebirth. Together with traditional religions, there is a space also found by non-institutionalized and popular religions (Helland 2004).

By Knoblauch's (2008a, p. 43) definition a popular religion represents a new social form, which goes beyond church and the institute. For Knoblauch such phenomenon is not the return of religion but just a change and broadening in the form of religion.<sup>5</sup> Knoblauch's concept of popular religion is broad and encompasses not only the manifestation of religious symbols and concepts in pop-culture, but also manifestation of religion through different media means including those forms that are often believed to be superstitious (esotericism, spiritism, magical energy of stones, belief in reincarnation etc). Popular religion has an affinity with the concept of popular religiosity (i.e. belief in prophecies, enchantments, protecting spirits). For Knoblauch mass phenomena and shrines also contain signs of popular religion.

Popular religion may be grounded on believes in supernatural forces as well as on religious-transcendental phenomena (Knoblauch 2006).<sup>6</sup> It is quite common to display crosses and icons in Georgian public transport, public institutes as well as in shops and the cult of healing water, wondrous icons, places and items is also quite popular. A new mass 'rite' of crossing at the sight of any church, at any place and from any location also contains a sign of popular religion. Such expressions of religiosity in Georgia go side by side with other forms of popular religiosity pertaining to pagan believes and rites. These rites are brought back to live in popular religious celebrations where Christian and pagan rituals, believes and faiths are intertwined (the examples of such mixed faith are cult rituals dedicated to St. George, Prophet Elijah and Mother of God still performed in the mountainous areas in Georgia).

The popular religion does not solely refer to religiosity existing beyond the limits of religious groups. For Knoblauch the media coverage and highlights of the Pope's pompous visits, is also a form of popular religion ("Die Eventisierung der religiösen Zeremonie") (Knoblauch 2008b). Looking at the Georgian context, the popularity and public trust enjoyed by the religious leader of the country, Patriarch Ilia II contain the forms of popular religiosity. This very popularity of the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church is extremely close to that of a leader's because of transparency and common belonging. Both practicing and non-practicing individuals express their loyalty towards the Patriarch. The popularity of Patriarch as well as popularity of geographical places and events that are associated with him points out that borders characterizing religion are being eliminated between the sacred and the profane whereby the sacred becomes a part of the profane.

---

5 See: Knoblauch, H 2000, Populäre 'Religion. Markt, Medien und die Popularisierung der Religion', *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* no.8, pp. 143 –161; Knoblauch, H.& Schnettler, B 2004, Die Trägheit der Säkularisierung und die Trägheit des Glaubens: Der Trendmonitor religiöse Kommunikation' und die religiöse Kommunikation heute, Ziebertz HG (ed.), *Erosion des christlichen Glaubens*, Lit Verlag, Münster, pp. 5-15.

6 The notion of popular religiosity originates from the Roman times - „religion populaire“, „religiosità popolare“. However, in its modern usage, the term implies popular religiosity and superstition.

Knoblauch (2008a, p. 43) draws his attention on the key characteristics of popular religion: market, media, and pop-culture. For Knoblauch (2006) Electronic Church<sup>7</sup>, New Age movement and pompous visits of the Pope are all examples of popular religion. On the other hand, Casanova (1994) deems these practices as the forms of public religion and adds TV-Evangelism to the list. The concepts of public and popular religions are similar in notion: both are characterized by popularity and openness having at the same time the forms of mass culture. “Their market products are available to broad public”. Religious communication penetrates various forms of life and therefore it is becoming more visible and more public.

Transformation of the forms pertaining to traditional religion (Luckmann 1991) blurred the fine lines between popular religion and profanation of religion or occupation of new cyber-spaces by the religion. Together with new technologies, new forms of communications are being developed and the same refers to the religious communication. Structural transformation of communication has resulted in destroying borders between the public and the private (Knoblauch 2008b).

Popular religion often experiences symbiosis with church religiosity. It is not rare when a religious entity (church) tries to be a source for popular religion in order to reinforce its status with one or another form of religiosity, and also to simply apply to new means of communications to booster religiosity. Together with the emergence of new technologies and spaces for socialization, religious institute has lost its hegemony as it ceased to be the sole owner of religious communications means. Popular religion or new spiritualism as Knoblauch puts it, is growing beyond the realms of the institute (2008b).

Yet another aspect worth mentioning, is that popular religion is vividly subjective, which, on the other hand, does not necessarily indicate to its privacy. Popular religion removes the line between privacy and publicity being located in between them (Knoblauch, 2006). As mentioned above, the forms of popular religiosity may appear in public sphere in the form of active and visible institute, i.e. Casanova’s ‘public religion’ (1994).

If we consider the Internet as a combination of media and market, that largely characterizes popular religion, then cyber sphere and new media means are perfect instruments for promoting both popular religiosity and traditional religions (Helland 2004). You are individually traveling across the limitless and digital religious world. The Internet, as a free and limitless space, is a perfect place for the revitalization of religion. Online space is open for private, traditional and new religions.

---

7 Electronic Church is preaching Christianity and calling for missionary work through TV or other new media, radio, websites (cf. Hoover, SM. 1988, *Mass Media Religion. The Social Sources of the Electronic Church*. Newbury Park, CA.).

Helland defines popular religion as unofficial religion. While differentiating between official and unofficial religions, he relies on the definition provided by McGuire, who argues that official religion is ‘set of beliefs and practices prescribed, regulated and socialized by organized, specifically religious groups... which set norms of belief and action for their members, and ... establish an official model of what means to be one of us’ (McGuire 1997, p.101). Helland chooses to call popular religion unofficial religion and defines it as “set of religious and quasi religious beliefs and practices that is not accepted, recognized, or controlled by official religious groups” (McGuire 1997, p.108)

The definition of popular religion referred below is of Knoblauch’s, implying the expression of religion through different means of communication. This definition encompasses both unofficial religion as well as untraditional religiosity, as identified by the institute, which is often on the brink of spiritualism, magic and profanation.

### 2.3 When religion meets digital world

Scholars working on religion have been paying particular attention to relations between religion, the Internet and new communication technologies. As mentioned above the comeback of the religion is reflected on the virtual world: religion side by side with sex is one of the most popular topics in the Internet (2004).<sup>8</sup>

Scientific research on the internet and religion has gained a new momentum: new terms have been coined and the observations/discoveries from new surveys have come to the surface. The forms of religious expressions have gained new forms together with the development of the Internet and new media technologies. In 1999 Yahoo sub-category on religion listed 11.000 websites on the Christian belief, 64% of which were dedicated to official denominations. By 2002 the number of the websites had raised 300%. Christianity is the most widely represented religion online accounting for 78% of online religious websites (Helland 2004, p. 26f). As Helland (2007) observes, most traditional religions widely use the Internet. Religious individuals find the Internet as “spiritual medium facilitating religious experience, a sacramental space suitable for religious use, a tool promoting religion or religious practice and a technology for affirming religious life” (Campbell, 2005, pp. 9-10). Hence, those practicing religion have started or continued to practice religion online. The Internet has become “a tool to extend a church’s offline ministry into online spaces” (Campbell 2013, p. 1).

---

<sup>8</sup> According to Knoblauch (2006) The number of the Christian webpages has increased from 610.000 to 9.1 million between 1999 and 2004 while the church launched webpages hit 65 million from 7 million in the search engines.

A new term ‘digital religion’ has emerged lately reflecting on the development of digital media and a wide representation of religion in it (Campbell 2013).<sup>9</sup> Digital religion is a religion which is being born in a new (digital) environment under the influence of new technologies.<sup>10</sup> Campbell’s term is a broad notion and includes not only the religious practice which has developed under the influence of digital media technologies but also any form of online religion. Campbell focuses on one of the characteristics of digital religion that ties together online and offline religious field.

We can think of digital religion as a bridge that connects and extends online religious practices and spaces into offline religious contexts, and vice versa. This merging of new and established notions of religious practice means digital religion is imprinted by both the traits of online culture (such as interactivity, convergence, and audience-generated content) and traditional religion (such as patterns of belief and ritual tied to historically grounded communities). (Campbell H, 2013, p. 3f)

The relationship between religion on the one hand, and the Internet and new technologies, on the other, is a mutual shaping<sup>11</sup>. Together with the emergence of new forms of religious expression and religiosity, new spiritual beliefs and perceptions are also developing.

## 2.4 Identity in digital age

A human being is in the center of the media-religion relations being both a creator and the object of this interaction. The Internet, mass, digital and social media actively participate in everyday life. Interaction with the media gives rise to new forms of self expression and new sets of behavior with new rules and new identities (cf. Turkle 1995).

Sherry Turkle (2005) argues that the technologies influence not only what people do, but also how they think and what they think of (Turkle 1984). Virtual, medialized space offers new forms of socialization and dictates new rules. In medialized reality, the interaction between religious or secular leaders, groups and individuals with the media, influences and shapes individual identities. In our digital century or as puts it, in late modern society, a human being is medialized (cf. Hjarvard & Lövheim (2012). She or he owns more than one identity, both real and virtual. The question here is to what extent our online self is our real self. We carry a few personality (cf. multiple self by

---

9 More about see Campbell, Heidi (ed.) (2013). *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, Routledge, London and New York.

10 1990s saw the emergence of a new term cyber-religion, “a way to describe the importing of virtual reality technologies” (Campbell 2013, 2f). The term failed to embrace the diversity generating from relations existing between digital media and religion and therefore required further expansion.

11 See MacKenzie, D & Wajcman, J 1999, *The Social Shaping of Technology*, Open University Press, Buckingham, UK ; Williams, & Edge, D 1996, ‘The Social Shaping of Technology’, *Research Policy*, Vol. 25, 1996, pp. 865-899.

Turkle 1995). They are not homogenous, but are linked to each other. ‘Virtual self’ is an echo of a real one, mirroring our real selves, as argued by Turkle (1994).. However, virtual self is more versatile and fragile.

The opportunity to acquire multiple identities or avatars (Turkle 1995) makes the virtual space even more attractive for its users who can change or reinvent their images, have multiple selves/avatars. Users tend to constantly seize such an opportunity.

The experience of playing selves in various cyber-contexts, perhaps even at the same time, on multiple windows, is a concretization of a way of thinking about the self, not as unitary but as multiple. In this view, we move among various self states, various aspects of self.<sup>12</sup>

This quality pertaining to the online world shakes the idea of a single identity to the core. Similar to the real world whereby an individual performs multiple social roles, their identity is not a whole and static. Virtual world gives us an opportunity to recognize our selves and develop further. Through the Internet so called “transitional space” (Lövheim 2005) has been created in which oneself can be presented through and interact with others with online computer-mediated communication (CMC). Being online means being public and private at the same time.

One has a new space for commenting on the complexities and contradictions among the selves. So, experiences in cyberspace encourage us to discover and find a new way to talk about the self as multiple and about psychological health not in terms of constructing a one but of negotiating the many.<sup>13</sup>

Through the social networks, individual’s online identity has come closer to his or her real image. In fact, a Facebook image is perfect leaving little space for inspiration towards recognition, performance and narcissism, which is not unfamiliar for the Facebook community (cf. Carpenter 2012, p. 483). In a way this is just *self in profile*. The Facebook reflects individual’s aspirations, desires, interests and other identity. Often people ‘live’ under different images, behavior and of course, name in the social network. It is not rare when they ‘use’ Facebook and Twitter for different purposes. In most cases this is two radically different persons in different social networks. However, the source of projection is a single individual.

A user’s choice of profile picture varies from his or her own photo to those of celebrities and role models. Sometimes photos of children and friends are also used as profile a picture which

---

12 An Interview with Sherry Turkle. Interview was conducted in February 1999 by Joseph E. Davis, viewed 12 August 2014, <http://www.iasc-culture.org/THR/archives/Identity/1.1KTurkle.pdf>.

13 An Interview with Sherry Turkle. Interview was conducted in February 1999 by Joseph E. Davis, viewed 12 August 2014, <http://www.iasc-culture.org/THR/archives/Identity/1.1KTurkle.pdf>.

indicates that the user's image is closer to his or her real emotions. Occasionally profile pictures may go beyond individuality and depict historic moments or important ongoing events. For example, active Georgian users of Facebook had the Japanese flag as their profile pictures for months thus expressing their solidarity towards the tsunami and power plant explosion victims in Japan in 2010. The same happened in 2013 concerning the notorious political crisis in Ukraine. Hence, the forms and scale of expressing solidarity are undergoing changes. Moreover, the attitudes and behaviors of a user towards one or another ideology also changes (cf. Lövheim 2012, Lövheim, M, Jansson, A, Paasonen S & Sumiala, J 2013).

### **3 Renaissance of Religion in Georgia – Some main tendencies in contemporary Georgia**

#### **3.1 Rising of Religiousness and Trust towards the Georgian – Orthodox- Church**

One of the most important trends in post Soviet Georgia is a growing significance of religion and the church. From the period following the independence in 1990, the importance of religion and its influence on political and social areas has been steadily growing. Religion largely determines and reinforces the identity of a modern Georgian and therefore, religious opinions and related issues have played a significant role in the national discourse (Zviadadze 2014a). Apart from the growth of individual religiousness, the increasingly active involvement of the Church in social and political processes is another sign of religious resurgence.

A rise in individual religiosity in the Georgian society resulted in growing popularity of and trust towards the Church (Georgian Orthodox Church). This trend can be explained by the opportunities for development after a long period of outlawing religion under the communist rule, on the one hand<sup>14</sup>, and on the other, it has become a source for addressing spiritual and ideological gap during the social and political crisis. In addition, religion was considered as an important part of national identity in Georgia. In the post-independence period, the Church has played an increasingly important role in the national discourse. The fact that religion and ethnic identity are closely intertwined has bolstered loyalty towards the Church, which has accumulated a substantial symbolic capital (Zviadadze 2014b).

---

14 The theory of modernization predicted that Eastern European countries would adopt the western model of modernization. In post-communist countries, however, this process led to the resurgence of religion and the rise of nationalism. See: Pollack, D, Borowik, I & Jagodzinski, W. (eds.) (1998), *Religiöser Wandel in den postkommunistischen Länder Ost- und Mitteleuropas*, Ergon, Würzburg.



A broad representation of religion in public space is another characteristic of the modern Georgia. Religion is a part of the media, public debates and political discourse. Religion is visible, as seen in the increased number of people participating in religious services, the majority of which are young people, the increased authority of religious leaders, the closer alignment of the Church and the State, the use of religion as an instrument in political affairs and the increased influence of religion (the Church) on different spheres of public life.<sup>15</sup> The Church's role in Georgia's public life is the topic of frequent discussions in media and social networks. It is not rare that the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church Ilia II serves as a mediator during political confrontations, commenting on appropriateness of adopting one or another law. Political leaders often express their loyalty towards the Church, in particular the Patriarch. Public expression of respect towards the religion and the Patriarch by popular figures is an integral part of the Georgian religiosity.

### 3.2 Religion as a significant determinant of national identity of Georgian Youth

Religiosity among the Georgian youth is quite strong. As illustrated by the latest surveys, religion occupies a significant place in social life and is important for their identities (Sumbadze 2012).

Religion is very important for young people.<sup>16</sup> Most of the Georgian churchgoers are young people. Their lifestyle is greatly influenced by religion. They strictly adhere to religious practices and traditions (regularly attend religious services, absolve, and observe religious fasts and holidays). They tend to think that religion is not only a private matter, for them it is an essential element of their social status. It is a source of their self-identification. The majority of respondents (65.9 %) believe that being Christian is more important for their self-identification than being a citizen of Georgia (Sumbadze 2012, p. 56).

For religious Georgian youth, the Internet and social media represent a new space for religious socialization (Lövheim 2012, p.153). Lövheim holds that such a venue for traditional socialization as church is, plays insignificant role for the religious socialization for the Swedish youth (Lövheim 2012, p.154). When comparing with the Georgian society, the rise in religiosity in post-communist period draws a different picture. Here the traditional arenas for religious socialization that are still well preserved are coupled with adaptation of new domains. Together with the end of the communist secularism, religion has filled ideological gap and penetrated in every public sphere. The growing reputation of religion and religious leaders (the Patriarch and the clergy)

---

15 All recent surveys show that the Church is the most trusted public institution (86 per cent) and the Patriarch is the most trusted person (90 per cent) in Georgia. Public attitudes towards elections in Georgia: Results of a April 2010 survey carried out by National Democratic Institute ( NDI)  
[http://www.ndi.org/files/Georgia\\_Public\\_Opinion\\_0410.pdf](http://www.ndi.org/files/Georgia_Public_Opinion_0410.pdf).

16 Significant majority of the respondents believe in God (96.7 %) and in sin (83.0 %), Sumbadze (2012), p.55.

has turned the church into an important arena for religious socialization. Reinforcement of religion in Georgia has coincided with the rise in new technologies and the process of public medialization. Therefore, the area of traditional religiosity has intertwined with the new spheres of socialization. 1990s saw the boom in religious literature and printed media while the Internet has become the most important venue for disseminating religious literature. The Internet homes such religious texts that are only available online including the sermons of the priests, conversations on religious themes, which has become a form of receiving information related to religious issues. Traditional and untraditional spheres of socialization, church<sup>17</sup>, friends, and the Internet represent the broadest arena for religious socialization for the Georgian youth<sup>18</sup>.

Based on the survey results conducted among the students of Ilia State University, we are going to have a closer look at the diversified role of the social media in regards to religion.

### 3.3 Facebook - most popular internet platform in Georgia

The Internet gives its users an opportunity to use a new space for spiritual life.<sup>19</sup> Nowadays the Internet is spiritualized (“Spiritualizing the internet”) (Campbell 2005). With over 900.000 users Facebook is one of the most popular and influential media tools in Georgia (Tsuladze, Berzenishvili, Esebua, Kakhidze, Macharadze & Kvintradze 2012). According to Social Baker, more than 75% of Georgian population uses the Internet while approximately 20% of the country population is Facebook users.<sup>20</sup>

There has not been any comprehensive study carried out in Georgia on social media and therefore empirical evidence on how religious groups use Facebook is not available. However, there is a body of research in Georgia focusing on the condition of the social media and its functioning. In Georgian social media space, social media fulfills just one out of its four functions (information, entertainment, democracy and control) – entertainment (Tsuladze, Berzenishvili, Esebua, Kakhidze, Matcharadze & Kvintradze 2012). To briefly characterize the Georgian media space (especially

---

17 It would be inappropriate to consider parents as the source of socialisation for traditional religion as this generation belongs to the Communist with banned religious practices.

18 The survey shows that the Church and the family represent the most marginalized arenas for socialization, while the role of the media, school and peers are coming to the front. (Lövheim 2012, p. 155).

19 “Spiritualising the Internet means the Internet is seen as a technology or space that is suitable for religious engagement, whereby allowing users to include Internet-based activities into rhythm of their spiritual lives“, Campbell, H (2005). *Spiritualising the Internet: Uncovering discourses and narratives of religious Internet usage. Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, 1 (1) viewed 17 August 2014 <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/volltexte/2005/5824/pdf/Campbell4a.pdf>.

20 Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC), *The Caucasian Barometer – Georgia*, viewed 17 August 2014 <http://www.crrc.ge/oda/?dataset=16&row=167&column=1>; Socialbakers Statistics - Georgia Facebook Statistics <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/georgia-2m>, see also *Freedom of Internet - Who controls the telecommunication sector in Georgia?* Transparency International Georgia, Tbilisi, February 2013.

blogs), it stands out with pluralism of ideas and absence of one dominant opinion. To compare with the traditional media, social media tends to be less biased and serves as a safeguard of impartiality (Tsuladze, Berzenishvili, Esebua, Kakhidze, Matcharadze & Kvintradze 2012, p. 5).

Unlike the traditional media, much pluralism and interaction available in the social media influence users' identity and behavior construction turning Georgian social media more into enabling environment for self-realization (Tsuladze, Berzenishvili, Esebua, Kakhidze, Matcharadze & Kvintradze, 2012, p.9). According to the study, even those who lack respective social capital, can become opinion leaders or celebrities, provided that they are effectively represented in the social media. Facebook particularly favors the leaders who are capable of influencing wide social media circles (cf. Tsuladze, Berzenishvili, Esebua, Kakhidze, Matcharadze & Kvintradze 2012, p. 8). Another study of the Georgian social network looks at influence of individuals in the social network (Babutsidze, Lomitashvili & Turmanidze, 2013).<sup>21</sup> The youth falling within 17-25 are the biggest group followers of opinion leaders (Babutsidze, Lomitashvili & Turmanidze, 2013, p. 327-28).

The Facebook is the freest space for discussion. According to the respondents, it is social media that creates an enabling environment to discuss the issues that are often avoided by the traditional media including religious, gender or ethnic minority related problems in Georgia (Tsuladze, Berzenishvili, Esebua, Kakhidze, Matcharadze & Kvintradze, 2012, p. 12). 'Social media in Georgia has a function to create a space for reciprocity and expressing protest.' (Tsuladze, Berzenishvili, Esebua, Kakhidze, Matcharadze & Kvintradze 2012, p.12).

Social media changes the way people interact with each other.<sup>22</sup> Under new patterns of interaction cultural traditions are changed or reinvented, while national or religious identities are also altered. It is difficult to imagine that users of the Internet who are now able to access huge body of information do not change their points of view (Tsuladze, Berzenishvili, Esebua, Kakhidze, Matcharadze & Kvintradze, 2012, p.74).

---

21 Babutsidze, Lomitashvili & Turmanidze (2013, p. 329) found that "the demographic characteristics of Facebook users in Georgia are similar to those of users in developed, populous and better-researched countries. Young female users dominate Georgian Facebook. Young female users are more active on Facebook. Young females who occupy strategic positions on Georgian Facebook possess disproportionately large power".

22 A new concept of 'friend' created within the social networks has developed as a totally new form relationship. It is assumed that such transformation of connotation of the word may go as far as to influence the cultural level as it entails the changes to the traditional patterns of relationships (Tsuladze, Berzenishvili, Esebua, Kakhidze, Matcharadze & Kvintradze (2012, p. 55).

## 4 Religion and Young Generation on Facebook: Experiences from a Georgian Case Study

### 4.1 Methodology

In order to study the affiliation of the youth with religion through Facebook, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. Target group of the study comprised young people from 18 and 26. Overall 169 students were selected for the survey purposes. On the first stage of the research, the researchers followed the respondents on Facebook (observation of the profile) with the purpose to identify the unique forms through which they expressed their interests towards religion or its affiliation and pinpoint dominant trends and characteristics. On the following stage, the research team examined the profile pictures to see if photos/pictures of religious contents (saint, church, the Patriarch, her or his own self in the background of a church) were used as profile pictures, whether or not they liked religious pages, share religious texts and prayers and if yes, how often, congratulates public holidays openly etc.

We were interested to see also to what extent a religious individual uses Facebook as a means for expressing religiosity.

The challenge faced while carrying out the *profile research*, is that in spite of the use of multi methodological approach, there is no guarantee that the material is authentic. As ‘having’ a Facebook profile means ‘creating’ one, we share a part of our identity, we construct the desirable and as time passes, Facebook alters our behavior, interests, and standpoint. This is mutual shaping. Therefore, the research and respectively the article only serve to identify trends.

On the second stage the degree of religiosity of the respondents was examined through a questionnaire based on the traditional methods of measuring religiosity (Hill, Peter C & Hood, Ralph W (1999), Norris, P& Inglehart, R (2005) as well as a set of indicators which are deemed important for our research. Our goal was to examine the correlation between online religiosity and/or non-religiosity and offline religiosity (implying religious self-identification or adherence to religious practices). The final stage of the research included in depth interviews with eight students.

It is worth noting that the students at Ilia University represent a specific group among their peers. Campus and urban life, regardless of their original place of residence profoundly influence their identity. Identification of the forms of religiosity in religious youth will allow us to uncover general and specific trends pertaining to the Georgian youth.

## 4.2 General trends – popularity of religious themes on the Facebook

In general, most of the students consider themselves as religious with only 18% who say they are absolutely nonreligious. Within religious youth the forms of religious self identification vary. Most of them perceive themselves as moderately religious (see Annex 1).

As a response to the question ‘to what extent do you consider yourself a religious person’, only few indicated that they are very religious (3%), 22% said they are quite religious while 35% assessed their religiosity as moderate. As found out as a result of analysis of the responses, the students implied more of religious practice than their own individual religious perception under the definition of religiosity. 84% of the respondents pray while 34% prays often. A vast majority - 95% said they believe in the existence of God and 89% think there is life after death. A religious expression of one of the respondents can serve as a good example of eclecticism: ‘s/he perceives herself or himself as Orthodox Christian, but absolutely non-practicing. S/he never attends church, rarely prays but strongly believes in God. S/he has repeatedly experienced moments when God interfered in her/his life’. A respondent, who considers herself or himself as non-religious, is often the one who is non-practicing and has a skeptical attitude towards the Church.

Most of the respondents perceive themselves as moderately religious. Both very religious and moderately religious users choose to express their affiliation with religion mainly through their option of profile pictures of a church, saint, or candles. It is often that posts of a religious person on the Georgian Facebook are very similar to those of clergy’s. This is much more than a religious affinity ticked in a questionnaire as an option. The survey analysis show that a very religious user almost always places religious posts, shares quotes from the lives of holy fathers, uploads photos taken during communion and those with priests or shot at the church services.

A practice of sharing ‘fortune giving’ and wondrous icons among religious and moderately religious users is quite common. Often a call to share is followed by a newly introduced ‘ritual explanation’ – ‘share 10 times to make it come true’. Photos of shrines are also often uploaded. Sharing and uploading chrisms oozing icons, profane places with the image of the Mother of God, revelation of a saint or related new rituals also constitutes a part of the common Facebook religiosity. Holy Fool Gabriel Monk (1929 – 1995) still enjoys an enormous popularity among a wider public including the Facebook users. Sharing and uploading quotes, sayings and legends attributed to Father Gabriel is the second most favorite materials to share online after those of the Patriarch Ilia II. The popularity of Father Gabriel has long gone beyond the limits of the Church and reached wider religious audience. After his death in 1995 his grave is always flooded with people who come to his final resting place to ask for support or cure. He was canonized in 2012 by the Georgian Orthodox Church thus institutionalizing his popularity by doing so. A video showing the opening of Father Gabriel’s grave and removing his body to the Trinity Cathedral went viral among

the Facebook users in 2014. The social media greatly contributed to spreading the ‘sacred footage’ of the monk’s ‘incorrupt body’. However, a group of skeptics, who questioned the authenticity of the viral video, spread another footage via the Internet debunking the belief of the monk’s incorruptibility contributing thus to ‘de-sacralization’ of the whole event. This case clearly demonstrates an immense role the social media can play in the religious event, be it the distribution of a ‘magic’ or its profanation.

#### 4.3 Few peculiarities of representation of religion on the Facebook

##### ***“I like my Patriarch”***

One of the specific features of this religious resurgence in Georgia is the upsurge of religiousness at both the individual and institutional level. All recent surveys indicate that the Church is the most trusted public institution (86% approval rate), while the Patriarch is the most respected leader (90%) in Georgia.<sup>23</sup>

Our research corroborates the popularity of the Patriarch in the virtual world. The loyalty towards the Patriarch is mostly expressed through sharing his pictures, extracts from his sermons, or making his photo as profile pictures. The latter caught our great attention. Profile picture is in a way a business card, and if we choose to use an image of a religious leader, saint or a church, it may be considered as one of the forms of religiosity in the modern times. Similarly, one often wears a cross to affiliate with Christianity.

Our research shows that the youth more often share the Patriarch’s pictures or his quotes (23%) than posts of other religious content. For example, 18% of the respondents share religious quotes, 12% prefer to share icons, 9% like to share prayers. The Gospel is the least quoted source (4%). The themes related to the Patriarch are the most popular religious topic on Facebook in Georgia. Pictures captioned ‘share if you love the Patriarch’ are often seen going around among a wide circle of users. Before his departure aboard, users often share photos calling for praying for his health. The Patriarch is a part of public religiosity. His sermons, appeals and official statements are aired on the national TV channels and the news anchors often highlight the major lines of his Sunday sermons. Such a broad medialization of the Patriarch can be labeled as “Eventisierung”, a term coined by Knoblauch while referring to the Pope’s visits as one of the forms of popular religion.

---

23 *Public attitudes towards elections in Georgia: Results of an April 2010*. Survey carried out by National Democratic Institute (NDI) viewed 15 August 2014  
[http://www.ndi.org/files/Georgia\\_Public\\_Opinion\\_0410.pdf](http://www.ndi.org/files/Georgia_Public_Opinion_0410.pdf).

One of the manifestations of the Patriarch's popularity is a trend to like a Facebook page 'I love my Patriarch'. Our research has shown that the page is liked both by religious as well as non-religious users. According to the Social Backer Statistics this Facebook page enjoys one of the most numerous fans. "I like my Patriarch" was a top regional performer 5 times.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Congratulating on the Religious Celebrations - popular form of public religiosity***

The research outcomes show that moderately religious users are the most active on Facebook. Responses to the questions as well as of the face to face interviews reveal that quite often very religious individuals choose not to express their religiosity on Facebook or they actively post religious quotes, share the photo of the Patriarch on the initial stage of becoming the users. Eventually, religious themes tend to disappear from their Facebook pages. A 23 year old female student says, as a new user whenever she saw an icon or the Patriarch's photo in her newsfeed, she used to like or share without much consideration: 'I thought if you were a Christian you had to share... Now I tend to think that it is not necessary to expose your religiosity to a wider public... I only congratulate on religious celebrations'. In addition to eventually turning down such manifestation of religiosity, some of the users often undergo changes in their standpoint. Some become critical of the religion or religious institute. As non-religious or less religious respondents say, their and their secular friends' critical attitudes mostly target the recent activities of the Church rather than a religion in general. A 19 year old male student admitted being more religious at school and often posting religious themes on his Facebook page, while after becoming a student his scope of interests have become broader and eventually came to conclusion that he did not want to express his religiosity in such a way.

On average, among the group of religious students the most widespread way of expressing religiosity is liking (61%) to be followed by congratulation posts on religious celebrations (41%). It is worth mentioning that the religious holidays are celebrated by both less religious and even non-religious users. This fact can be explained by the established attitudes towards religious holidays as a part of cultural tradition. If the Easter, Christmas or St. George's day are celebrated among a broader public, religious user congratulates her or his friends on major holidays and saints' days. The recently established tradition is to "ask for forgiveness" before the Easter lent, while in the past such practice would normally take place in the church or face to face with an individual whose forgiveness she or he may seek. This is a practice followed by the user who maintains her or his religiosity beyond the virtual space. What we are dealing with in this particular case is expressing religiosity through a modern medium which does not recognize lines between the public and the private.

---

24 *Socialbakers - February 2013 Social Media Report: Facebook Pages in Georgia*, Socialbakers, viewed 26 July 2014, <http://www.socialbakers.com/reports/regional/february-2013-social-media-report-facebook-pages-in-georgia> <<http://www.socialbakers.com>>.

### ***A priest as a Facebook friend***

Friend lists of Georgian facebook users are long: friends, relatives, acquaintances, people they know virtually. Religious leaders and priests, including the one they choose as their spiritual father, are added to the friend list of religious students. An opinion posted by a priest can get viral very fast. Content of dominant and popular religious posts is a subject of other research, however, we find it worth mentioning that the clergy exposing radical-fundamentalist dispositions are quite active on Facebook. For instance, Facebook became a venue for spreading appeals against the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia by the clergy opposing the demonstration on May 17 2013 in Tbilisi. Similarly, videos showing the priests protesting against the adoption of anti discrimination law by the Parliament of Georgia went viral on the Facebook in 2014. Georgian Facebook has also seen appeals and propaganda led by the Georgian priests against the electronic music festival KaZantip in summer 2014<sup>25</sup>. Facebook activities of the clergy (priests, monks) deserve a separate research. This time we will only focus on the factor as distribution of information on Facebook as the most popular media platform, profoundly influences a broad circle of users.

17% of users (out of 169 observed within the frames of the research) have the representatives of the clergy as Facebook friends. Following up to the videos of the priests is a widespread practice especially among extremely and moderately religious students while the same users very rarely read the Gospel. In those rare cases, when a young respondent said s/he would read the Gospel, we deal with an agnostic (by self-perception) or less religious person. Most of very religious youth (considering themselves as religious) express their religiosity by sharing the Patriarch's photo, quotes from the lives of holy fathers or sharing the videos posted by popular priests (See the chart 3,4,8). The sources of these videos are often their clergy friends on Facebook.

The social network plays a dual role within the Georgian society including our focus group. It is a fastest and the most diversified source for spreading information on religious issues. Therefore, the opinions of radical fundamentalists are often shared by the youth through their Facebook friends, especially when the primary source of these materials is a reputable priest. The same medium gives the youth an opportunity to make themselves familiarized with alternative viewpoints, look at facts critically and simply get to know modern debates in theology that would otherwise be inaccessible.

### ***Facebook as a space of critical religion discourse***

The observation on the Facebook profiles has revealed considerable interests towards religion whether it be expressing love and loyalty to the Patriarch, sharing an icon or a specific analysis of the church related issue. 46% of the users compose posts of religious content. Religious themes

---

25 The internet is more accessible in the capital therefore making it easier to mobilise radically disposed individuals through the Facebook.



always hit the top ten of the Facebook newsfeed (i.e. Patriarch's epistle critically assessing the surrogate births, participation of the priests in a rally protesting the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia). Religious themes and issues are often the subjects of heated debates on Facebook with many active users participating in it. As we have observed, many users were concerned and angry for supporting the violence by the clergy on May 17 2013. The footages describing the rally on this day got widely spread through the Internet allowing the Facebook users to access authentic materials and get to know what happened in reality while the TV channels showed edited and more neutral materials with little or no aggression shown from the side of the clergy. Disruption of a peaceful demonstration with a number of priests acting as aggressors played a critical role to change the climate on the Facebook ultimately resulting in removing a taboo over the critics of the Church. In general, the Facebook is the venue, which hosts an open critic of the Church. The major reasons for the critical attitudes are lack of engagement of the institute in social and charity activities, intransparent financial transactions and operations, possession of expensive luxury cars by the priest, behavior suggesting intolerance and non-Christian views by some of the priests.

The third group of the respondents, who consider themselves as non-religious, are active on the Facebook. They actively participate in debates around religious issues. The Facebook in Georgia represents the broadest and freest venue for discussion the religious issues characterized with expressing one's viewpoint in much more emotional and expressive manner.

In 2014 a video showing the opening of Father Gabriel's grave and removing his body to the Trinity Cathedral went viral among the Facebook users. The social media greatly contributed to spreading the 'sacred footage' of the monk's 'incorrupt body'. However, a group of skeptics, who questioned the authenticity of a viral video, spread another footage via the Internet debunking the belief of the monk's incorruptibility contributing thus to 'de-sacralization' of the whole event. The students shared their opinions on this matter. A 23 year old female student says that a debate about 'incorruptibility' has had a negative effect on her. She refused to go to the Cathedral thinking that if she truly believes, the Saint will always protect her. A long line of parishioners poses a stronger barrier. Another student told us she had gone to see the body of the Monk as all her friends did so; however, she did not like the sharing of the videos on Facebook.

## 5 Conclusion

In today's Georgia religion has vast influence on various spheres of public life. The Church and religious leaders are actively involved in a public discourse. Religion has penetrated a public space:

religious issues are discussed in public debates, political discourse, excessive highlights of the religious issues by the media, religious symbols in pop culture.

Having occupied a new public space, religion has now become an integral part both of offline and online worlds. A juncture of religion and digital media influences religion itself and the forms of religious identification as well as shapes the behavior and viewpoint of the Internet users.

The present article attempted to identify the forms of the religious affiliation emerged through the interaction of religion and the Facebook based on the cases of the most frequent social media users – the youth. The research has shown that visibility of religion in real life is also reflected on a social network. For most users of the Facebook it is a part of everyday life to interact with religious themes in the virtual world. Both religious and less religious users like/share and prescribe to religious pages and congratulate on religious celebrations. This is a minimum of expressing “public religiosity on the Facebook”. Sometimes people express their affiliation more intensely on the Facebook than in real life. Those who say that they attend the church only on religious celebrations are the ones who often post religious contents. This frequency is very well tuned up with the character of the facebook - you not only compose your post, but also unintentionally come across with religious texts shared by even nonreligious pages. Affinity of the youth with the religious themes is supported by dais supported by the virtual world, the Facebook friends, groups/pages, opinion makers active in social made while more traditional spheres of socialization - family and school - play diminished role.

The Georgian Facebook society is saturated with the religion expressed in the forms of icons, prayers, church songs sharing or writing a critical post about the Church. Most of the youth is not ignorant of the religions themes and the latter is important for both religious and non-religious users of the Facebook. It reflects the transformation process going within the society - heated debates on the role of religion for a public.

The Patriarch enjoys popularity in the virtual space. It's this popularity that bears the trends of a popular religion. Both very religious and less religious persons express their loyalty towards the Patriarch. The dates related to him (his angel's day, the day of enthronement and his birthday) and the quotes attributed to him are popular. In the offline space the popularity is expressed by putting up his photos at homes, in public transport, in the offices of the public servants. His photos are often used as a cover photo of a mobile phone. Stories get viral through media means and these stories are often distracted from the reality. The Facebook has given a rise to a new 'rites' – every time the Patriarch departs to seek medical treatment abroad, users start sharing special prayer and call on others to pray for the Patriarch's wellbeing. A prayer as a religious act has acquired a set of new rules as a result of its interaction with the new media. An important part of a preparation for the

Easter's lent, is the Forgiveness day which has abandoned a private space and moved to public and virtual sphere. Through the Facebook a religious person publicly asks for forgiveness.

Based on our research we can single out three distinct groups of the students: a) very religious b) moderately religious and c) non-religious students. The second group of moderately religious students is the largest and most eclectic group of the respondents. The diversity found within this group is determined by the difficulty of definition of religiosity. This group consists of the students for whom religion is related to regular religious practice and those who prefer individual feelings. Another sub-group consists of those who believe religion has purely national and cultural importance. Its members publicly express their religiosity and use the Facebook for this purpose. Another sub-group of the members only choose to congratulate others on religious celebrations. To determine whether or not sharing the Patriarch's photo indicates to the user's special attitude towards him or it is the act of simply 'clicking on a like button' (as one of the students puts it) can be a complicated task. The members of this group attach vast significance to the cultural importance of religion and to expressing religiosity with popular forms. It was within this very group that the biggest difference between Facebook and real religiosity was observed. Namely, the users belonging to this group tend to express their religiosity online more often than in real life. The reasons behind this practice may lie in a generally widespread trend of religious affiliation on the Facebook. Influenced by this trend, a user tries to establish themselves this way. Secondly, religion is the most favorite and close theme for users and therefore it is more comfortable and acceptable to share related posts. The third reason may be the convenience attached to virtual practices rather than to the traditional religious practice. It is worth noting that this aspect requires more in-depth analysis while our conclusions in the present paper rest upon the motivations of the students at Ilia State University. The third groups of non-religious students belong to users' active group. The group unites atheists, agnostics and those believers who dare to criticize the Church wanting to distance themselves from the Church as an institute. Their Facebook image was consistent with their attitudes towards the religion in real life.

Diversity within the students in regards with the religion is determined by the fact that the target group consisted of the students of one of the country's leading universities. Campus life and urban lifestyle, better Internet accessibility heavily influences their worldview. The diversity within the attitudes towards religion reflects the socio-cultural transformation ongoing in the younger generation.

Facebook tracks the changes in students' attitudes towards expressing religiosity publicly. There are cases when the religious posts and statuses of the previous years considerably differ from the recent ones. We were interested to find out whether or not this was a random or occasional change, however, as revealed the reasons behind these changes varied. One of the respondents said s/he changed an attitude towards religion in real life too becoming more questioning. The other

respondent told us her attitude remained the same, but she simply had chosen not to ‘talk to every single person about posts, prayers ... but she occasionally shares the Patriarch’s quotes’. The respondents are influenced both real public and the Facebook users as well.

Facebook is characterized with pluralism and freedom. According to our research, it supports the distribution of critical thinking about religion, alleviation of taboos and secularization. Facebook in Georgia is saturated with discussions and debates about religion. The nature of the social media allows religious groups to have daily and intensive contact with their parishioners, disseminate the Patriarch’s sermons, religious publications, lives of saints. It reinforces loyalty, knowledge and the ownership among the believers. Facebook serves as an effective venue allowing its users to self-identity themselves with the religion they follow. The same medium is the means for spreading radical religious thoughts favoring fundamentalist groups and religious leaders to disseminate the material and mobilize large groups without any institutional support. This dialectics characterizes any new technology. The same virtual space contributes to lifting off the taboo on and de-sacralization of religious issues. The Facebook in Georgia represents a platform whereby a different opinion is freely voiced and a critical judgment, including on religious issues, is freely shared. This cannot be qualified as resacralization of religion. It supports the process of secularization and as the new technology has not diminished sacrality. It can be assumed that the religion has found a new form and occupied a new virtual space. The new media has reinforced the expression of traditional religiosity and also supported a popular religion and demystify of the world. Religion has become more public, digital and visible. In Georgian reality, considering historic and modern socio-political changes, transformation of religion is manifested in a full range. Thus, strengthening institutional religion (the Church) is coupled with establishing new forms of individual religiosity.

## Bibliography

Babutsidze Z, Lomitashvili T & Turmanidze K 2013, ‘Influential Individuals on Social Networks: An Example of Facebook in Georgia’, *European Scientific Journal*, December, /SPECIAL/ edition vol.4, pp.320-329.

Berger, PL 1973, *Zur Dialektik von Religion und Gesellschaft: Elemente einer soziologischen Theorie*, Frankfurt/M.

Berger, PL 1999, ‘The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview’, Berger PL (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Grand Rapids, MI: Ethics and Public Policy Center/Eerdmans Washington, DC, pp. 1-18.

Bruce, S 2002, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford.

- Campbell, H 2005, 'Spiritualising the Internet: Uncovering discourses and narratives of religious Internet usage', *Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, 1 (1). viewed 17 August 2014, <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/volltexte/2005/5824/pdf/Campbell4a.pdf>.
- Campbell, H 2013, "Introduction: The rise of study of digital Religion", Campbell, Heidi, (ed.), *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds.*, Routledge. London and New York, pp. 1-21.
- Carpenter, Ch J 2012, 'Narcissism on Facebook: Self-promotional and Anti-social Behavior'. *Personality and Individual Differences* no. 52, pp. 482–486.
- Casanova, J 1994, *Public religions in the modern world*, Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Casanova J 1996, 'Global Catholicism and Politics of Civil Society', *Sociological Inquiry*, 66, pp. 356-373.
- Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC), *The Caucasian Barometer – Georgia 2012*, viewed 17 August 2014 <http://www.crrc.ge/oda/?dataset=16&row=167&column=1>.
- Gabriel, K 1996, *Religiöse Individualisierung oder Säkularisierung. Biographie und Gruppe als Bezugspunkte moderner Religiosität*, Kaiser Gütersloher Verl. Haus, Gütersloh.
- Habermas, J 2001, *Glauben und Wissen*, Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels, viewed 1. August 2014 [http://www.friedenspreis-des-deutschen-buchhandels.de/sixcms/media.php/1290/2001\\_habermas.pdf](http://www.friedenspreis-des-deutschen-buchhandels.de/sixcms/media.php/1290/2001_habermas.pdf).
- Helland, C 2004, 'Popular religion and the Internet: A match made in [cyber]heaven', L. Dawson & D. Cowan (eds.), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, Routledge, New York, pp. 23-36.
- Helland, C 2005, 'Online Religion as lived Religion. Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet'. *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 1.1.
- Helland, C 2007, Diaspora on the electronic frontier: Developing virtual connections with sacred homelands. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12(3), article 10, viewed 12 August 2014, <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol12/issue3/helland.html>.
- Heelas P & Woodhead L 2005, *The Spiritual Revolution. Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*, Wiley- Blackwell, Oxford.
- Hjarvard S. & Lövheim M (eds.) 2012, *Mediatization and Religion: Nordic Perspectives*. Nordicom, Gothenburg.
- Hill, PC & Hood, Ralph W 1999, *Measures of religiosity*, Religious Education Press, Birmingham.
- Hoover, SM. 1988, *Mass Media Religion. The Social Sources of the Electronic Church*. Newbury Park, CA.

Knoblauch, H 2000, Populäre ‘Religion. Markt, Medien und die Popularisierung der Religion’, *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* no.8, pp. 143 –161.

Knoblauch, H.& Schnettler, B 2004, Die Trägheit der Säkularisierung und die Trägheit des Glaubens: Der Trendmonitor religiöse Kommunikation‘ und die religiöse Kommunikation heute, Ziebertz HG (ed.), *Erosion des christlichen Glaubens*, Lit Verlag, Münster, pp. 5 –15.

Knoblauch, H 2006, ‘Die populäre Religion’, *Theologisch-Praktische Quartalsschrift* no.154, vol. 2, pp. 164-172.

Knoblauch, H 2008a, ‘Die populäre Religion’, *TV Diskurs - Verantwortung in audiovisuellen Medien*, Jg 12 (44), pp. 42-47, viewed 29 July 2014, [http://fsf.de/data/hefte/ausgabe/44/knoblauch042\\_tvd44.pdf](http://fsf.de/data/hefte/ausgabe/44/knoblauch042_tvd44.pdf).

Knoblauch, H 2008b, ‘Die populäre Religion und die Transformation der Gesellschaft’, *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* (APUZ) N. 52, pp.3-8 viewed 1 August 2014 <http://www.bpb.de/apuz/30759/die-populaere-religion-und-die-transformation-der-gesellschaft?p=all>.

Knoblauch, H 2009, *Populäre Religion. Auf dem Weg in eine spirituelle Gesellschaft?* Campus, Frankfurt am Main/ New York.

Lövheim, M 2005, ‘Young People and the Use of the Internet as Transitional Space’, *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 1.1.

Lövheim M 2012, ‘Religious Socialization in a Media Age’, *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, no. 25 (2), pp.151–168.

Lövheim, M, Jansson, A, Paasonen S & Sumiala, J 2013, ‘Social media Implications for everyday life, politics and human agency’, *Approaching Religion* no. 2, Vol. 3, December , pp. 26-37.

Luckmann, Th 1963, *Das Problem der Religion in der modernen Gesellschaft. Institution, Person und Weltanschauung*, Rombach, Freiburg .

Luckmann, Th 1993, *Die unsichtbare Religion*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main.

McGuire, M 1997, *Religion: The Social Context*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

MacKenzie, D & Wajcman, J 1999, *The Social Shaping of Technology*, Open University Press, Buckingham, UK.

National Democratic Institute (NDI), *Public attitudes towards elections in Georgia: Results of an April 2010*. Survey viewed 15 August 2014, [http://www.ndi.org/files/Georgia\\_Public\\_Opinion\\_0410.pdf](http://www.ndi.org/files/Georgia_Public_Opinion_0410.pdf).

Norris, P & Inglehart, R 2005, *Sacred and Secular: Religions and Politics Worldwide*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Pollack, D, Borowik, I. & Jagodzinski, W (eds.) 1998, *Religiöser Wandel in den postkommunistischen Länder Ost- und Mitteleuropas*, Ergon, Würzburg.

Ranneberg, K, Royer, D & Leuker, A (eds) (2009), *The Future of Identity in the Information Society: Chalanges and Opportunities*, Springer, Wiesbaden.

Riesebrodt, M 2001, *Die Rückkehr der Religion. Fundamentalismus und der Kampf der Kulturen*, Beck, München.

Socialbakers Statistics - *Georgia Facebook Statistics* <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/georgia-2m>.

Socialbakers -*Social Media Report: Facebook Pages in Georgia, February 2013* viewed 26 July 2014, <http://www.socialbakers.com/reports/regional/february-2013-social-media-report-facebook-pages-in-georgia>.

Sumbadze, N 2012, *Generations and Values*, Institute for Policy Studies, Tbilisi.

Taylor, Ch 2007, *A Secular Age*, Belknap, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Turkle, S 1994, 'Constructions and Reconstructions of Self in Virtual Reality', *Playing in the MUDs, Mind, Culture, and Activity*, Vol. 1, N. 3 Summer, pp. 158- 167.

Turkle, S 1995, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet.*: Simon and Schuster, New York.

An Interview with Sherry Turkle. Interview was conducted in February 1999 by Joseph E. Davis, viewed 12 August 2014, <http://www.iasc-culture.org/THR/archives/Identity/1.1KTurkle.pdf>.

Turkle, S 2005, *The Second Self. Computers and the Human Spirit*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition, Mit Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London.

Wilson, B 1966, *Religion in Secular Society: A sociological Comment*, C.A. Watts & Co. LTD, London.

Wilson, B 1976, *Contemporary Transformations of Religion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

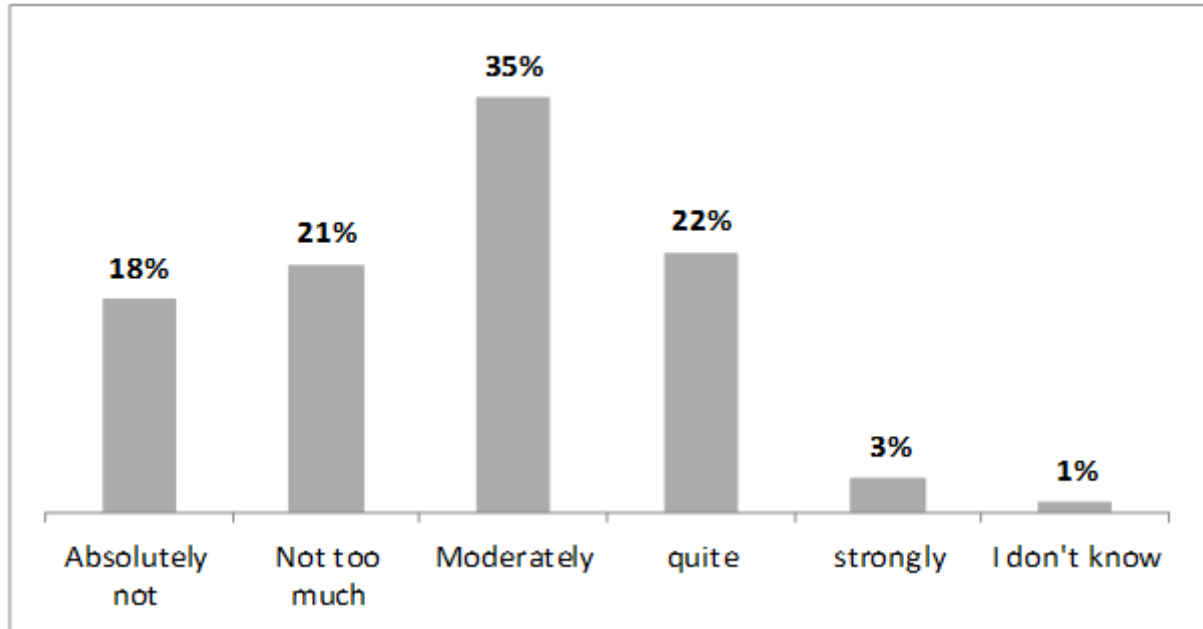
Williams, R & Edge, D 1996, 'The Social Shaping of Technology', *Research Policy*, Vol. 25, 1996, pp. 865–899.

Zviadadze, S 2014a, *Religion und Politik in Georgien. Die Beziehungen von Staat und Kirche und die Säkularisierungsproblematik im postkommunistischen Georgien*, Verlag Dr. Kovač, Hamburg.

Zviadadze, S 2014 b, 'Religion, National Culture, and Human Rights in Georgia', in: Ziebertz, HG & Cripic, G (eds.), *Religion and Human Rights: an International Perspective*, Springer Verlag, Wiesbaden, pp. 56-71.

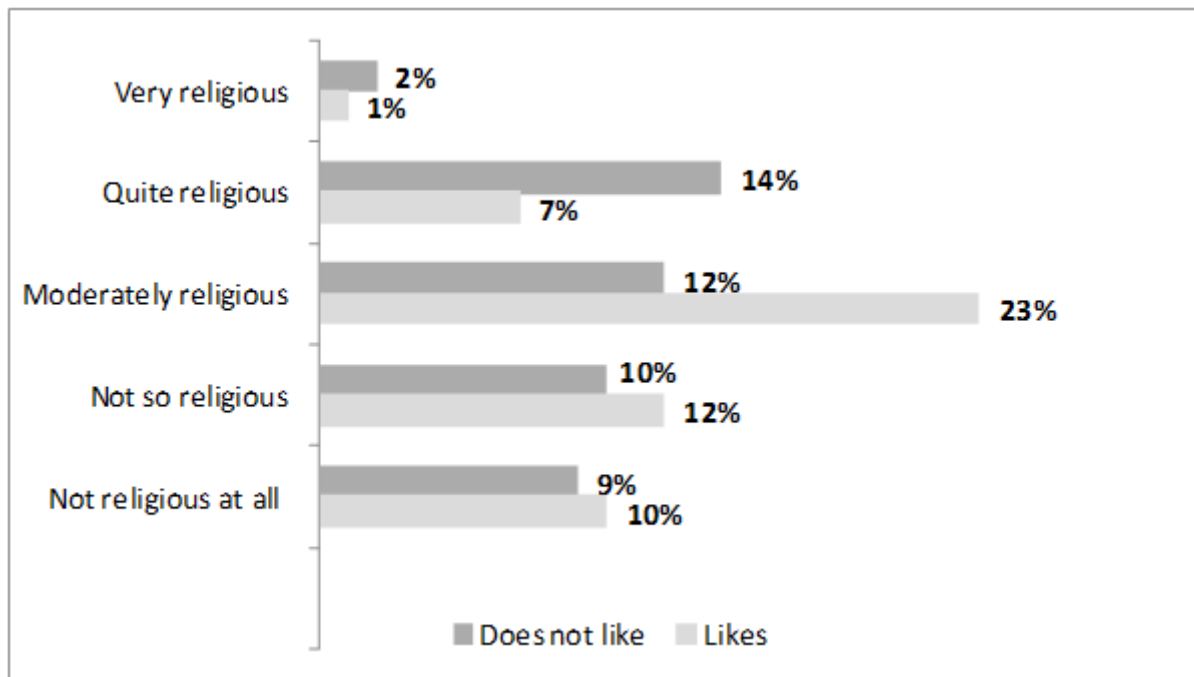
## Appendix

### 1. Do you consider yourself religious?

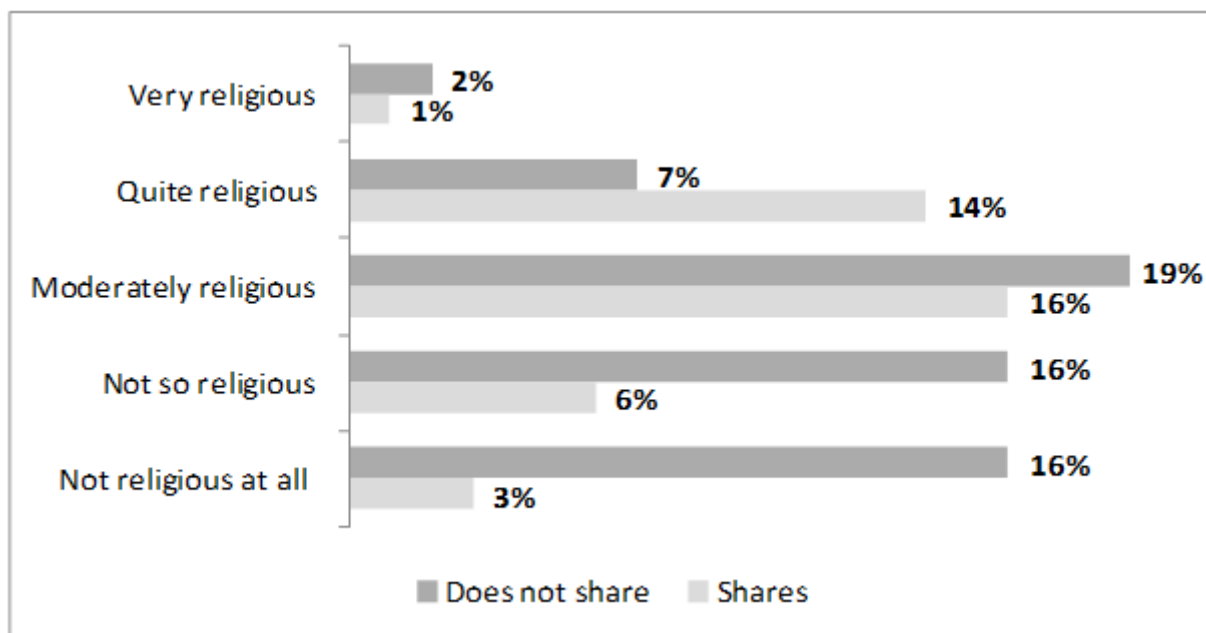




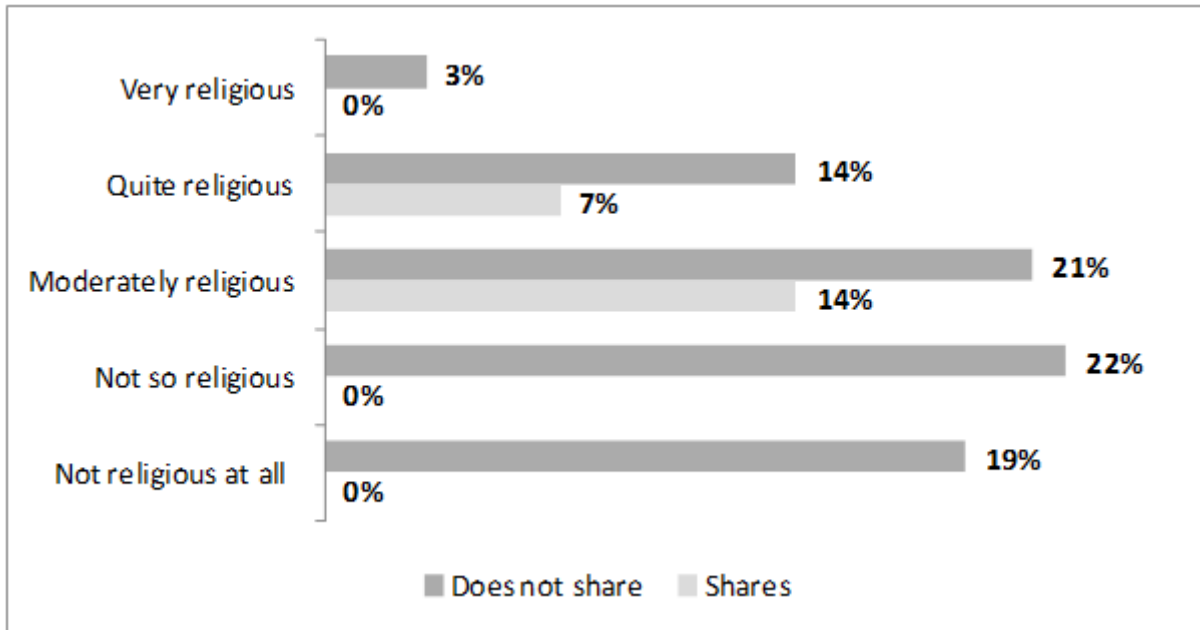
**2. Perception of self-religiosity/Likes the pages**



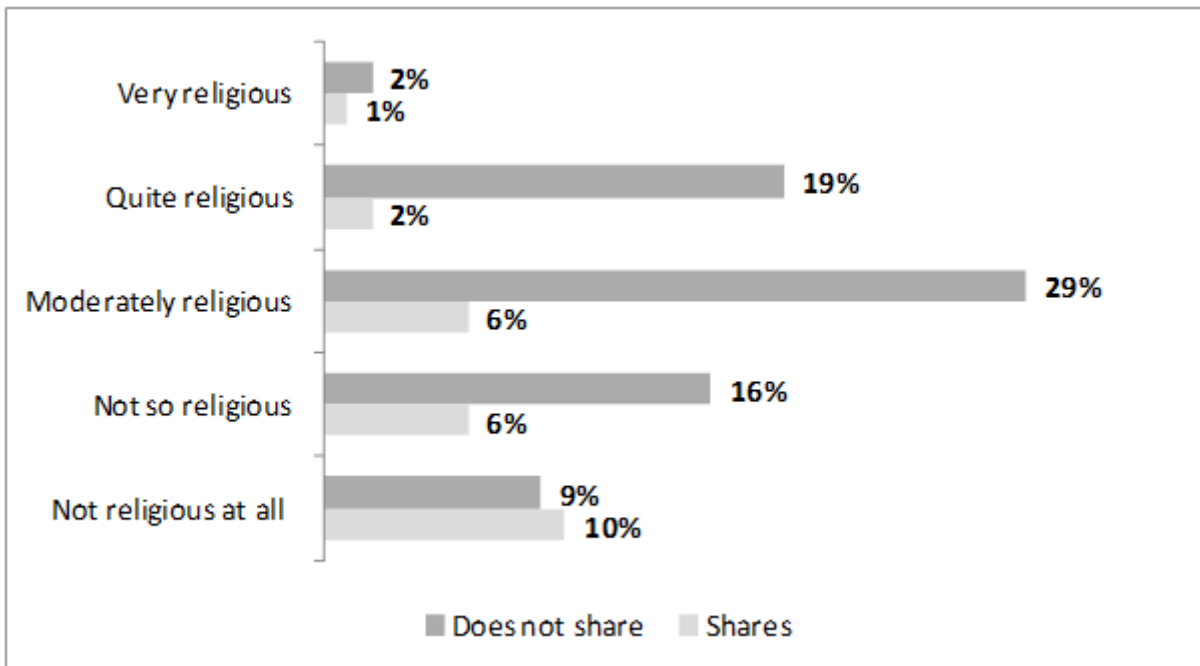
**3. Perception of self religiosity/Shares posts of religious content**



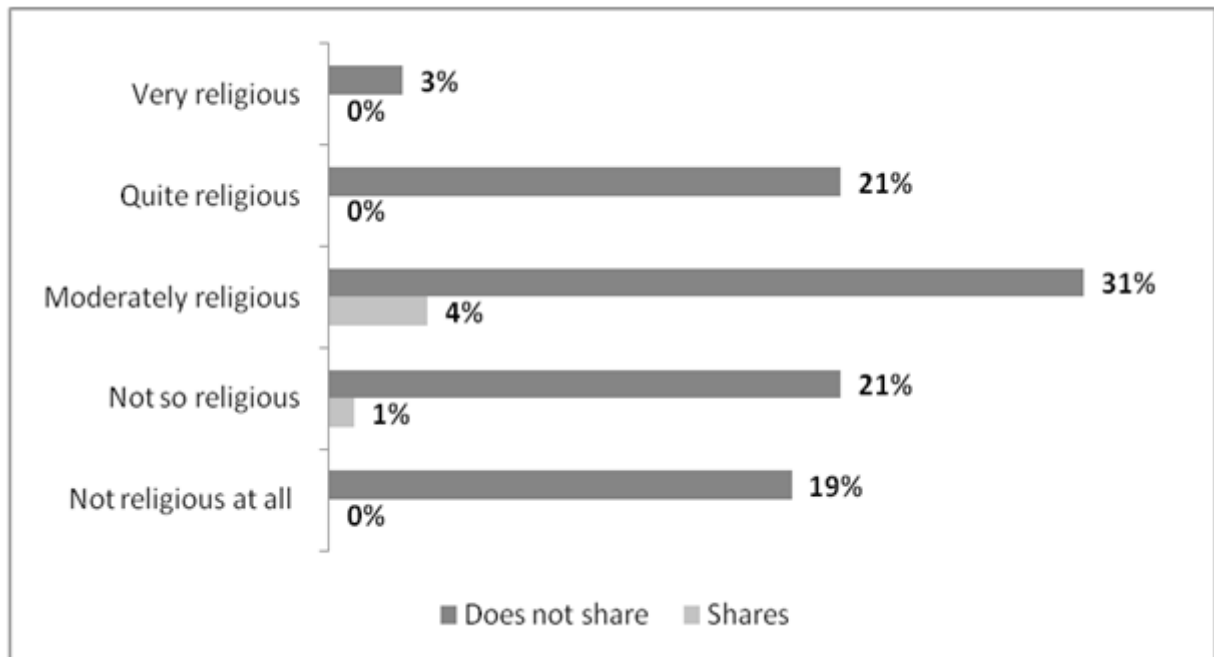
**4. Perception of self religiosity/Shares the Patriarch's photos and quotes**



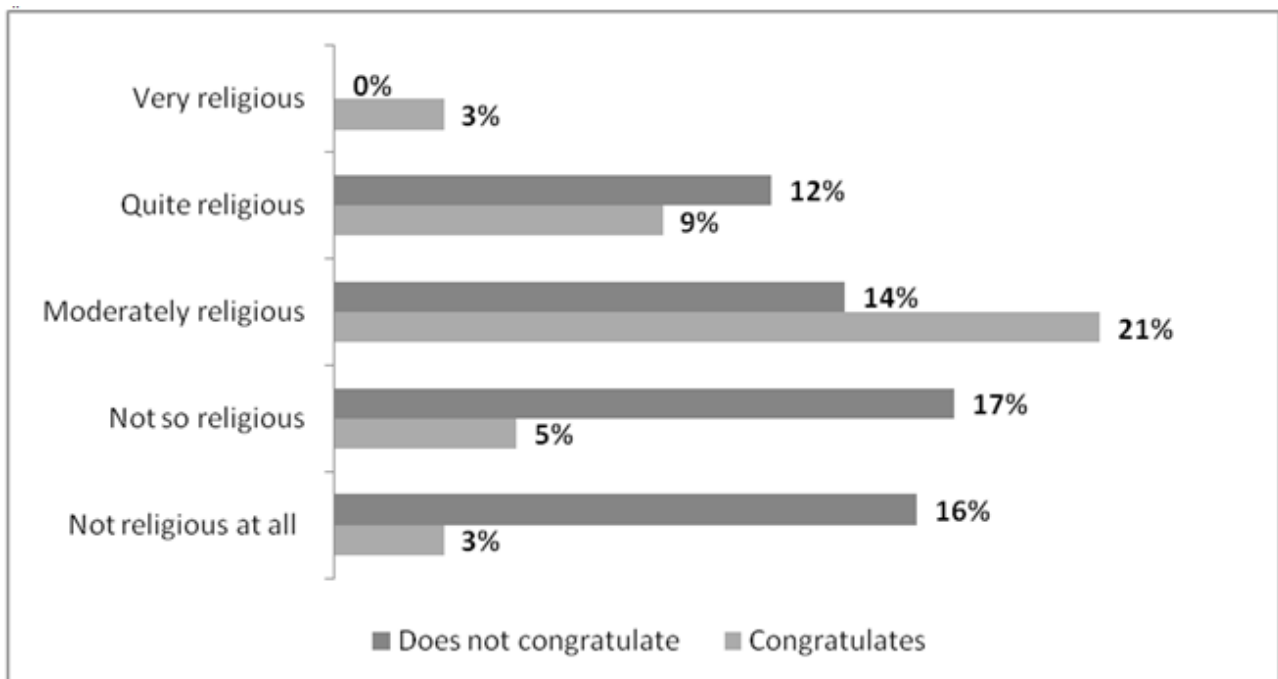
**5. Perception of self religiosity/Whether or not shares posts criticizing religion**



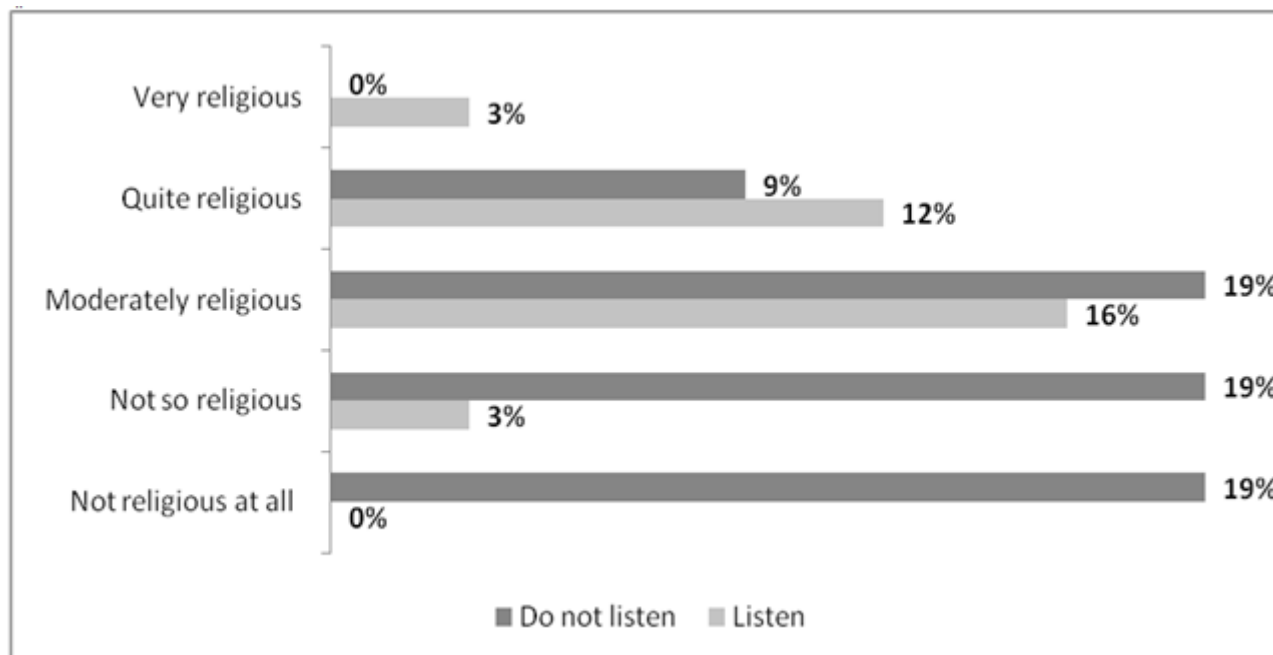
**6. Perception of self religiosity/Shares or posts quotes from the Gospel**



**7. Perception of self religiosity/Congratulates on religious celebrations/holidays**



### 8. Perception of self religiosity/Do you listen to sermons on the YouTube?



**\*Note:** I am grateful to Students at Ilia State University for participating in research: Anne Chelidze (PhD candidate), Shoko Bazerashvili (BA), Erekle Maisuradze (BA), George Nuskheladze (MA), Mzia Sherbakovi (BA)

#### Biographical Note

SOPHIE ZVIADADZE, Ph.D., is lecturer in Religion and Culture Studies, Political and Social Science in the Faculty of Arts and Science at the Ilia State University, Georgia. Her central fields of research and teaching are the Role of Religions in modern society, Relation of Politics and Religion, Secularization, preferably focusing on Transformation of Religion in post-communist countries, Religious Identity of Youth.

She is researcher in international project CASCADE (Exploring the Security – Democracy Nexus in the Caucasus) by the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme.

Dr. Sophie Zviadadze  
 Faculty of Arts and Science  
 Kakutsa Cholokashvili Ave 3/5  
 Tbilisi 0162, Georgia  
 E-Mail: [sopiko.zviadadze@iliauni.edu.ge](mailto:sopiko.zviadadze@iliauni.edu.ge)