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Introduction

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1 Religion in the Internet: Texts and Contexts

In the course of the 1990s, the Internet extended into every area of society and social life. It turned thirty in 2013 and Facebook, that symptomatic space where the new generations of the interactive Web (Web 2.0) make their first appearance, celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2014. Whether it represented an until-then unmatched opportunity to spread messages nearly universally (Lévy 1994) or a threat to the social link due to rampant individualism (Breton 2000), the French social sciences have evaluated the ever-larger place occupied by the virtual positively or negatively, depending on the analyses carried out.

The religious participates fully in the ongoing digital revolution and religions have adapted relatively quickly to technological modernity. In some cases they have actually led the way. Today, the religious phenomenon – whether we consider official religions or the religious in general – is abundantly present on the web; the Internet is even capable of becoming the target of a belief or cult itself. The most recent events in France too – the terrorist attacks in Paris in January 2015 – cast a harsh light on the worldwide use of the Internet by persons engaged in radical islamism.

Research on the subject first began in Anglo-Saxon countries in the late 1990s. In 1996, Stephen O'Leary, an American specialist of religions and communications was one of the first to stress the major impact the Internet was having on the development and dissemination of religions, an impact he thought was tantamount to the invention of the printing press. According to him, the Internet today plays the role of sacred space (O'Leary 1996). Since that pioneering study, research has proliferated, confirming or nuancing that point of view. Among the wealth of English-language studies, we have chosen to mention some of the main themes that surfaced over the past twenty years.[1] Christopher Helland (2000), for instance, makes a fine distinction between 'religion online'

1 A more detailed description and many references can be found in the article by Heidi Campbell (2006), 'Religion and the Internet', *Communication Research Trends*, vol. 25, no. 1, viewed 21 October 2014,

(religious contents accessible on the Web) and 'online religion' (experiencing mysticism through the medium of the Internet). The term cyber-religion was also rapidly introduced and, from an epistemological viewpoint, would seem to designate a religion existing exclusively in the cybernetic space (Hojsgaard 2005). Another pioneer in the field of relations between the Internet and the religious, Heidi Campbell, uses the expression 'religion online' for "the form traditional and non-traditional religious practices and discourses take when they appear on the Internet" (Campbell 2006, p. 3).[2] The work carried out by this scholar,[3] or by Mia Lövheim, and many collective ventures too, such as the volumes directed by Lorne Dawson and Douglas Cowan or by Morten Hojsgaard and Margit Warburg, among many other publications, bear witness to the vitality of this field of research (Dawson & Cowan 2004; Hojsgaard & Warburg 2005).

The essential contribution of the present online journal must also be acknowledged: *The Online Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* endeavors to publish and disseminate work done on the topic.

On the French side, thinking out the question of digital cultures generally shaped up only later. In the introduction to his book *Les liaisons numériques* (Casilli 2010), Antonio Casilli shows how difficult it was, towards the end of the 1990s, to establish the study of digital networks as a subject for the social sciences in France. In fact, work in this area remained sparse for a long time, limited to publications specialized on networking or the media.[4] Sociologists and anthropologists carried out field work, both on- and offline, mainly on the themes of sociability, identity building and 'bricolage'. Questions concerning the cyber-space, the relations to the body or the nature of the connections wrought by Internet users were the main points analyzed and debated (Casilli 2010; Pastinelli 2007). This field of research, still wide open, extends today to the investigation of 'digital cultures' and 'digital humanities' in the most varied sectors such as games, illness, publishing, art or intimate relationships (Casilli 2011; Lardellier 2012; Bergström 2013; Rubio 2013; Beunet 2013).

French scholars are presently also concerned with methodology. In 2013, during the conference preceding this publication, the first textbook to analyze the Web written for social science specialists came out (Barats 2013). A timely occurrence for many scholars caught up in the

<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-145983341.html>, as well as in (2012), 'Understanding the relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 80, no. 1, pp. 64-93. Also see Rosalind I. J. Hackett (2005), 'Religion et Internet', *Diogène*, vol. 211, no. 3, pp. 86-99.

2 Morten T. Hojsgaard stresses nevertheless that a pure cyber-religion can only be a fiction, since a website requires at least one webmaster who exists and performs in the real world.

3 See Campbell, H 2005, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We Are One in the Network*, Peter Lang, New York. We should also mention a larger network initiated in 2010 by this researcher: *Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture Studies*, an incomparable source for all those working on the religious and the Internet, or on the Web as a field for research. Viewed 27 March 2015, <http://digitalreligion.tamu.edu/>.

4 See e.g. the journals *Réseaux* and *Hermès*.

process of thinking out the methods to apply in the particular case of analyzing digital productions: contents, social practices, usages, flux. It shows that mastering the technical aspects, though not absolutely central to the process, must at any rate be taken into account by researchers.[5]

As a point of entry for studies on the Internet, the religious has long escaped analysis, though in the pioneering works it figured already, e.g. in references to the religious atmosphere surrounding the media (Breton 2000), or in essays pointing out the alliance between religion and techno-science (Sallenave 2004) or yet again in the relationship between the Internet and Utopian discourse (Serfaty 1999).

But it was above all in their own fieldwork that French researchers became aware of, and had to take into account, the irruption of the Internet in the expression and organization of the religious phenomena they were in the process of examining. In one of the first articles on the theme, entitled *Les dieux sur le Net. L'essor des religions d'origine africaine aux États-Unis* ("Gods on the Net. The rise of native African religions in the United States"), ethnologist Stefania Capone studied the presence on the Web of African-American initiates who developed new versions of the African origins of their cults (at the root of many political issues). In putting the question of how the local and the global, the virtual and the physical interconnect, the author notes that "it is therefore on the World Wide Web that the lines of changes to come in the universe of African-American religions are drawn" (Capone 1999, p. 68, trans. G.V.). Since the start of the years 2000, several other researchers have analyzed the upheavals triggered by the use of the Internet in their respective fields. Concerning the appearances of the Virgin Mary, Paolo Apolito (2003) noted that the traditional tension between institutional authority and personal charisma no longer prevailed. Céline Choucouron-Gurung (2007) noted the obsolescence of tools permitting an offline control of Jehovah Witnesses in France in the face of the controversies they unleash on the Internet. As to Cécilia Calheiros (2012), she analyzes the fabrication and visibility of an eschatological prediction for the end of 2012 by applying a predictive software, the 'WebBot Project', initially conceived to anticipate the oscillations of the stock market.

A fair number of French language studies have been devoted to the upsurge of Islam online. During the 1990s, representatives of 'official' Islam as well as well-known personalities belonging to the political opposition got hold of the new media and used them to publish and distribute. Thanks to the development of the interactive Internet, new sectors emerged: online fatwas, religious instruction and question-and-answer websites based on daily life. 'New ulamas'[6] can thus be heard (Anderson 2003; Gonzalez-Quijano 2000; Houot 2003). Olivier Roy (2000, 2002), one of the first

5 Also see the methods proposed for analyzing Facebook in the article: Bastard, I, Cardon, D, Fouetillou, G, Prieur, C & Raux, S (2013), *Travailleurs et travailleurs de la donnée*, Internet Actu.net, viewed 5 January 2015, <http://www.internetactu.net/2013/12/13/travail-et-travailleurs-de-la-donnee/>.

6 The expression 'new ulamas' is borrowed from the work by Olivier Roy and Malika Zeghal.

scholars to have become interested in the theme, noted already in 2000, that on the Web, "there is no undisputed authority" (2000, p. 222) and came up with hypotheses on the reasons why the Salafist message was the most apt to constitute a virtual Umma (2000, p. 230).

In a more global perspective, Jean-Francois Mayer, in his book *Internet et religion* (2008) analyzes a large number of religious websites. It was and for a long while remained the reference in French to describe the various ways the religious was present online. In it, the author developed the notion of 'cybersacré'.

In her book *Dieu en ligne* (2013) Isabelle Jonveaux, one of the first French scholars to place the presence of religion on the Internet at the heart of her investigations, analyzed how the medium is used by Catholic 'religious virtuosi', also pointing out its limits. She concentrates mainly on the presence and visibility of the religious on the social networks.

It is however necessary to point out that in France such studies are still rather few and far between.

The aim of the present digital publication is to present one of the first collective attempts to think out religion on the Internet in France from the point of view of the social sciences. The originality of the approach lies in the diversity of the religious contexts considered and in its pluridisciplinary nature, where sociology, anthropology, history and the sciences of communication all take part.

But, though innovative and pioneering, the present study is nevertheless also part of an on-going, dynamic movement which in the coming years will witness an intensification of the interrogations, research programs and publications on the theme. We must not forget in particular the recent issue of the journal *Médiation et information* (eds Douyère, Dufour & Riondet 2014), dedicated to the study of the communicational dimension of religions;[7] or again, among other on-going research projects, the ANR ENEID program, *Eternités numériques, identités numériques post mortem et usages mémoriaux innovants du web au prisme du genre* ("Digital Eternities, digital post mortem identities and new, gendered, memorial practices on the Web") (2014-2018) which means to look at both France and China in comparative perspective.[8]

7 The volume brings together articles following work carried out by the Network Relicom between 2010 and 2013. The network's websites can be consulted on: http://relicom.jimdo.com/; and http://relicom.hypotheses.org/.

8 An international research network on the same theme was set up following the The First International Death Online Research Symposium held in Durham in 2013: "dead on line research", http://deathonlineresearch.net.

2 The questions underlying this publication

This publication means to explore the ways the Internet and Religions relate by replacing them in specific cultural and religious contexts. Our objective is to forefront in-depth analysis of the relations between the Internet and religions and to grasp the socio-cultural changes induced by the arrival of the digital in the religious sphere. Is it just one more medium through which contents can be disseminated, or does the Internet produce deep-seated transformations – and if so, in what realms and in what ways?

It is above all necessary to look into the concept of religious community in order to understand in what way digital and interactive communication leads us to reconsider the concept in the light of new behavior patterns, most often limited to a type of self-presentation, or to building an 'online self'. But at the same time, is Internet not also where one's identity, veiled or even totally masked by one's pseudo, allows for behavior that shows either great trust or an unconcern that anonymity alone permits (Jonveaux 2013)? Also, the Web becomes the place where collective identities are expressed, a place where an online community can be reasserted or built up (Lardellier 2012). What about the 'virtual' nature of these communities? How do Internet users occupy those spaces, how do they interact among themselves?

This brings us to the need to reconsider the traditional conceptions of time and space, to take their relative dwindling into account. How are relations between the center and the periphery reorganized online, between the local and the global, between private and public spaces? Are we seeing a reinforcement of local anchorings or an intensification of religious globalization? How does the Internet cause the ways of setting up transnational networks to evolve, does it guarantee a connection between geographically distant communities? Should the analyses in terms of diasporas (Niculescu) be resumed afresh?

Religious authority too is being readjusted on the Web (Niculescu; Obadia; Jonveaux 2013; Kirschleger). Is doubt not being cast on traditional religious authority? And what of the growing visibility of the minority movements that lay claim to a place in the sun on the Web? Is the Internet just one more medium at the disposal of religious groups or is it fundamentally transforming relations of power and authority? This raises the issue of religious legitimacy, dissidence, counter-powers and the places where they can be voiced, and of lay opposition. What do religious groups choose to show of themselves in terms of content, image and virtual identities? Do they exert control over their websites?

We also thought it important to elucidate practices and rituals on the Internet (Jonveaux 2013; Duteil-Ogata; Kirschleger). In fact, over and beyond issues of visibility and communication, the presence of the religious on the Web poses the delicate question of the possibility of religious

practice online, the forms it takes and its eventual limits. The Internet seems to permit forms of re-inventing the religious, forms of hybridity and ritual 'bricolage'.

Following this line of thought, does not the technical tool itself sometimes become the object of a cult? Do digital media give way to new forms of religiosity? How do rituals on the Internet make do with the absence of the carnal envelope which did seem indispensable for a certain number of traditional religious activities such as conversion, confession, funeral rites?

Another interrogation tackled by all the authors concerns the continuity or lack of it between offline and online religious manifestations. Do those who use digital media for their religious practice already practice religion in offline reality? Are online and offline practices complementary? Are there religious practices that have been observed online exclusively?

Anglo-Saxon studies often focus on online practices; French research tends to compare online and offline rituals – shuttling between the two and attempting to pinpoint the offline effects of what transpires online and vice-versa. Most of the French-speaking participants at the conference that led to the present publication usually explicitly refer to fieldwork carried out offline with an eye to comparing the two forms of presence. They pay attention to the way the religious on the Internet may radically transform the 'real'. But it is precisely that question of the relationship between offline and online reality – for which a bad habit often makes one employ the term 'virtual' – that interests the authors. Are the borders between offline and online still relevant?

To conclude, the present analysis implies that each author has thought out their methodology in depth. The new technologies force scholars to question their own positioning, to ask themselves which methods to implement in this particular context. How does one define and circumscribe an area of research on the Internet? How can the main actors online be identified, how can they be accessed? Who are the 'conceptors' - those who create the websites, decide on their content and their organization? Is it the already existing offline religious institutions, or self-appointed leaders, or radical groups that find new audiences, a new legitimacy on the Internet …? What use do they make of the written word and the image? What becomes of the research scholar behind the screen? Are there tools available to broach the religious on the Internet or must they be totally reinvented or created from scratch?

It may seem simple to carry out a content analysis of the websites at our disposal thanks to their visibility – is it not that very visibility that defines them? However, it is indispensable to grasp the way they are received and the uses to which they are put.

We asked the authors of the group to pay careful attention to all these questions. Each has answered according to their discipline and the specifics of their field of investigation.

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