METHODS AND THEORY FOR STUDYING RELIGION ON THE INTERNET

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE ON THEORY AND METHODOLOGY[1]

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When the topic of religion on the Internet was highlighted in the late 1990s, Lorne Dawson raised some basic questions for future research:

> First, we need to know what is on the Internet, who has put it there, and for what purpose. Second, we need to know how many people are using these resources. How often are they using them? In what ways are they using them? We need to develop a social profile of those who use the Internet for religious purposes ... Third, we need to know what influence these activities are having on religions and practices of users.[2]

Religious Internet research is just beginning and some of these questions have provoked initial answers – but most of the questions have stimulated even more issues with regard to substantial and methodological demands. The social aspects and consequences of religious Internet use, particularly, still have to be considered in further research. Immanent Internet research offers many new perspectives for religious studies. While traditional media like books, magazines, and television enable us to see only the supplier and the supplies on the *religious market*, the Internet – as an *interactive* medium – now makes it possible to be aware of the consumer's perspective as well. By observing Internet chat rooms, guest books, frequently asked questions (FAQs), and discussion forums and discussion lists (which are normally archived) on religion-related Web sites in particular, we can observe the way religious knowledge is spread in an online community in detail. We can recognize that these new processes of communication create new hierarchies among users in discussion forums. This new diffusion of ritual knowledge, which is nowadays accessible to every Internet user, also signifies changes in the traditional structure of religious communities. However, we still know very little about what people are actually doing with the ritual and religious knowledge that they gain from Internet use.

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[2] Dawson 2000, 28.

Thus, on the one hand we need to discuss new methodological and theoretical approaches in Internet research but we also have to consider the shortcoming of past approaches. Some Internet researchers, for example Clair Hewson et al., do not recognize any methodological problems in pure online research and have an euphoric view of Internet users as "the most diverse and easily accessible group available to researchers in the behavioral and social sciences."[3] However, although religious communication on the Internet enables us to trace many instances of "invisible religion,"[4] the "disembedment" of our empirical field of research causes some new methodological challenges that must not be ignored. Dealing with these empirical and theoretical aspects of computer-mediated communication (CMC) might help us to evaluate the results of online research and develop reliable research strategies for further projects in the field of religion on the Internet.

This first volume of *Online. Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* contains six articles dedicated to theoretical and methodological questions concerning the topic of religion on the Internet. Other than Mia Lövheim's contribution, all articles are derived from papers presented at the International Research Meeting *Online-Religions and Rituals-Online*, held in October 2004 at the University of Heidelberg, Germany. The conference was organized by members of the research project *Between Online-Religion and Religion Online: Forms of Ritual Transfer on the Internet*, which has been part of the *Dynamics of Rituals* collaborative research center at Heidelberg University since 2002.

In his article *Online Religion as Lived Religion: Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet* Christopher Helland proposes a more comprehensive framework for his theoretical distinction for online religion and religion online. When he developed this typology in 1999, Helland recognized a clear distinction between religious Web sites where people could act with unrestricted freedom and a high level of interactivity (online religion) versus the majority of religious Web sites, which seemed to provide only religious information and no interaction (religion online).[5] He now advances the religion online / online religion framework by drawing from the ongoing critique of his earlier work. He concludes that many religious Web sites today provide both information and an area where this information can be lived and communicated. This occurs on the Internet where Web sites try to incorporate both an information zone and interaction zone in a single site or, more commonly, where popular unofficial Web sites provide the area for online religion, while the official religious Web site supplies religion online. In cases where institutional

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[3] Hewson et al. 2003, 31.
[4] Luckmann 1967.

religious organizations do not support online religion he assumes that it may be due to their perception of the Internet as a tool for communicating rather than an extension of our social world.

Heidi Campbell deals with another important aspect of "lived religion" and the Internet. In her contribution *Spiritualising the Internet: Uncovering Discourses and Narratives of Religious Internet Usage*, she focuses on how spiritual or religious worldviews shape the use and study of the Internet. Individuals and groups typically employ one of a range of conceptual models (such as the Internet as an information tool, identity workshop, common mental geography, social network or spiritual space) to frame their understanding of Internet technology and how it should be used. Narratives about the nature of this technology are often embedded within these discourses. Of particular interest to Campbell is the identification of narratives used to shape religious or spiritual Internet usage. Some of these can be described as offering a religious identity, support network, spiritual network or worship space. According to Campbell, religious narratives describe the religious group's motivations and beliefs about acceptable use of technology in spiritual pursuits. They also highlight a process of negotiation and framing that is often undertaken in order to justify religious Internet usage. Campbell introduces Katz and Aakhus's *Apparageist* theory of the social use of mobile technology, which provides one way to discuss this religious apologetic process related to the Internet.[6] She is convinced that it also helps to uncover how technological selection can be linked to the spiritual worldviews to which individuals and/or groups ascribe.

In his article *The Death of a Virtual Muslim Discussion Group: Issues and Methods in Analysing Religion on the Internet*, Göran Larsson discusses and tests the way an Islamic online discussion group could be analyzed. The contribution deals both with theoretical and methodological questions. All the suggested approaches are tested against data taken from the Swedish Muslim discussion group, *Sveriges Förenade CyberMuslimer* (SFCM), which was the largest Muslim discussion group in Swedish at the time of writing. Larsson argues that it is necessary to develop fresh approaches and combine online research with traditional fieldwork (in particular interviews) in order to be able to use data taken from the Internet. Larsson also demonstrates that analyzing a Swedish Muslim discussion group requires recognition of the significant exchange with the global Muslim community in different languages and on many "global" topics.

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[5] See Helland 2000, 205-224.
[6] See Katz & Aakhus 2002, 305.

In 1995, Sherry Turkle argued that "virtual experiences" – that is experiences of interaction and the construction of meaning and identity online – could be "the raft, the ladder, the transitional space, the moratorium, that is discarded after reaching greater freedom." In short, "life on the screen" was considered as a "space for growth."[7] As in many contemporary studies, Turkle's conclusions were heavily influenced by the utopian or dystopian ideas of the public and academic discourse of the Internet during the mid 1990s. A decade later, Mia Lövheim now asks what we have learnt about the possibility of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) providing this space? When, where, how, and for whom can this become a reality? Her article *Young People and the Use of the Internet as Transitional Space* discusses this issue, starting from an area of central importance to these issues: religion and young people in the process of constructing self-identity in the transition from childhood to adulthood. Studies of religion in post-modern society have shown that the function of religious beliefs, practices, and institutions in providing a transitional space for such processes is changing. Lövheim presents her recent study of young men and women using a Swedish Web community for discussing both established and alternative religious discourses, and for forging what Nancy Ammerman terms "religious autobiographies".[8]

Gernot Meier deals with some methodological problems in his article *Researching Individual Religiosity in the Context of the Internet.* Focusing on the FIGU Community and the Ashtar Command Movement on the Internet, Meier illustrates our theoretical and empirical difficulties in defining a religious community on the Internet. In the end, he provides a perspective on new research systems for Internet researchers.

Finally, Oliver Krüger discusses some empirical problems of Internet research in his contribution *Discovering the Invisible Internet. Methodological Aspects of Searching Religion on the Internet.* Analysis of online discussion groups within the Wiccan and neopagan movement that refer to rituals indicates that new social and hierarchical structures also emerge within the "online community". Nonetheless, only subsequent interviews with users of those discussion forums could reveal some basic aspects of online communication and its social dimension. This gives rise to some further questions. How much can we tell about communication on religious Web sites? What are the limits of an immanent analysis of Web sites? What can we tell about social structures within online communities and about individual user preferences in a ritual discourse? How can we deal with the problem of identity of Internet users? What is empirically invisible for us? Acknowledging the limits of

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[7] See Turkle 1995, 262.
[8] See Ammerman 2003.

our conclusions on postmodern religion and religious people derived purely from online research, Krüger advocates combining online research with classical empirical fieldwork, such as quantitative surveys or qualitative interviews with users and Webmasters.

We hope that these articles dealing with theoretical and methodological aspects of Internet research in the field of religion will initiate a fruitful debate and further reflection on different approaches and research methods.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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