

The background is an abstract painting with thick, expressive brushstrokes in shades of ochre, grey, blue, and green. A white mouse cursor arrow is positioned on the right side, pointing towards the title text.

Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture

PERSPECTIVES, PRACTICES AND FUTURES

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1. Introduction: Religion 2.0? Relational and Hybridizing Pathways in Religion, Social Media, and Culture

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Religion 2.0?

“Religion 2.0” can be aptly introduced by the example of *Confession: A Roman Catholic App* for the iPhone and iPad (Little i Apps, 2011). For the relatively modest price of \$1.99, *Confession* invites users to confess, and keep track of, their sins. As we will discuss in this chapter, it is enormously significant that *Confession* is *not* marketed as a complete and virtual replacement for a central rite in the Roman Catholic tradition. Rather, as the *Confession* description on iTunes carefully points out:

The text of this app was developed in collaboration with Rev. Thomas G. Weinandy, OFM, Executive Director of the Secretariat for Doctrine and Pastoral Practices of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and Rev. Dan Scheidt, pastor of Queen of Peace Catholic Church in Mishawaka, IN. The app received an imprimatur from Bishop Kevin C. Rhodes of the Diocese of Fort Wayne—South Bend. It is the first known imprimatur to be given for an iPhone/iPad app. (ibid.)

In this way, *Confession* is careful to make explicit how far it is integrally interwoven with both the traditions and relevant authoritative hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. Moreover, *Confession* users are reminded that in order to receive absolution for their sins, they will still need to take the matter up with a real priest in a real church. *Confession* is hence clearly still rooted within the ancient practices and structures of the Roman Catholic Church, and, if anything, seeks to reinforce and enhance those structures and practices rather than call them into question, much less seek to overturn them.

Confession represents and exemplifies larger trends that emerge across the course of this volume on digital religion, new media, and culture. Here, we and our contributors examine how far “religion”—meaning, minimally, the individual and institutionalized practices, values, and beliefs that make up specific religious traditions—interacts with the multiple affordances and possibilities of computer-mediated communication, most especially those affiliated with Web 2.0. We understand these to include social media especially, such as social networking sites (Facebook), blogs and micro-blogs (Twitter), sites featuring user-generated content (YouTube and Wikipedia), and virtual worlds and online games (*Second Life* and *World of Warcraft*). Most broadly, *contrary* to 1990s’ theory and rhetoric that emphasized radical distinctions between the (online) virtual and the (offline) real—so that, for example, some might argue that a virtual church or a virtual practice such as *Confession* could fully *replace* their offline, real-world counterparts and connection points—Religion 2.0 by and large represents an amalgamation and assemblage of real- and virtual-world practices. To be sure—and in keeping with much of the hype surrounding Web 2.0 as ostensibly ushering in a new age of radical individualism and thereby greater freedom, equality, and democracy—the affordances and practices of Web 2.0 media in many ways profoundly challenge more traditional structures, norms, and practices. At the same time, however, these challenges—with few but notable exceptions—issue less in radical revolution, and more in transformation and reconfiguration of existing practices, beliefs, and infrastructures. These findings, moreover, are consistent with similar patterns noted in the broader fields of new media and intercultural communication (Cheong, Martin, & Macfadyen, 2012) and Internet Studies (Ess & Consalvo, 2011). So it is, then, that *Confession* seeks to complement and amplify, but ultimately reinforce—not replace—an ancient religious practice.

To see how this is so, we begin with a brief note on the origins of this volume, as an entrée into the larger conceptual matters and issues that constitute the frameworks of the volume. We will then briefly introduce the chapters themselves, as organized into three sections: “Theorizing Digital Religion,” “Empirical Investigations,” and “Historical and Theological Examinations.” Following this, we will explicate three major themes that cut across the organizational boundaries of the sections, namely, *identity*, *community*, and *authority*. Specifically, we articulate a dialectical perspective in digital religion and culture, by identifying central tensions and highlighting multiple interdependent links that are characteristic of what Schement and Stephenson (1996) noted as “unavoidable frictions” and “endemic tensions” in mediated religious practice. We will explore how specific chapters contribute to these relational and hybridizing dynamics with the three major themes, as part of our developing a broader understanding of Religion 2.0.

Origins

Our volume has its beginnings at the Church and Mission in a Multireligious Third Millennium conference, held at Aarhus University, Denmark (January 27–29, 2010). The co-editors of this book collaborated on the organization and presentation of a paper session and a panel, entitled *Church in Cyberspace* and *Church and Social Media*, respectively, in which we emphasized attention—theoretical, theological, and empirical—to social media and religion in particular. Inspired by both Knut Lundby's keynote for the conference— included here in revised form—as well as by our initial findings as collected in the panel presentations, we thought it might be time for an anthology focusing on what we now call Religion 2.0, i.e., the manifold interactions between, on the one hand, diverse expressions and institutions affiliated with religious traditions and practices around the globe, and, on the other, the equally diverse and rapidly changing affordances and possibilities of Web 2.0. Our thoughts on the timeliness of such an anthology were reinforced by the fact that it has now been over seven years since the appearance of a major volume dedicated to religion and CMC (Computer Mediated Communication). Happily, Mary Savigar and Steve Jones at Peter Lang agreed that a collection on Religion 2.0 would be worth pursuing as part of their Digital Formations series. And so, in addition to encouraging panel contributors to develop their presentations into suitable chapters, we issued an open call for papers and also invited key figures in the field of religion and CMC to participate. Very happily, the result is what we like to think of as a symbiosis between younger and more seasoned scholars and researchers.

The first section, "Theorizing Digital Religion," begins with a revised version of Knut Lundby's keynote speech, *Dreams of Church in Cyberspace*. Lundby took up a media sociological perspective, one that focused more closely on the *content* of messages rather than their medium. Lundby was thereby able to critique more enthusiastic claims for cyberspace, virtual communities, etc., in ways that are directly relevant to the Church's interest in mission.

Bernie Hogan and Barry Wellman echo and reinforce Lundby's critiques by way of a larger historical overview of Internet Studies. As the title suggests, "The Immanent Internet Redux" argues against 1990s' claims of a radical divorce between the real and the virtual, the offline and the online—a divorce that would otherwise issue a "transcendent Internet." While instances of such a divorce can be found, the prevailing trends are in the opposite direction—again, as our opening example of *Confession* suggests—towards complementary relationships and resonance between offline and online.

Pushing beyond familiar notions of Web 2.0, Bala A. Musa and Ibrahim M. Ahmadu seek to build a more complex and holistic model of contemporary communication. Their "New Media, Wikifaith and Church Brandversation"

focuses specifically on “Wikifaith” as “people-centered, people-cultivated,” vis-à-vis specific processes of “brandversation,” i.e., the diverse processes that shape specific churches and their sense of identity, as they perceive the need to establish themselves as brands in a market-oriented, pluralistic society. One of their central questions is how far the church can learn to sell itself in this new environment—but without selling out entirely and becoming simply another commodity shaped entirely by the casual needs and interests of “prosumers” (p. 75). It is worth noting here that Peter Fischer-Nielsen and Stefan Gelfgren highlight precisely this theme of ever-growing commercialization as a major point of concern and research in their concluding chapter.

In her “How Religious Communities Negotiate New Media Religiously,” Heidi Campbell raises these and related core issues concerning how religious institutions—and individuals—can retain something of their traditions and identities in contemporary (and, as Musa and Ahmadu remind us, increasingly commercialized and commercializing) communication environments. Rather than addressing these questions head on, Campbell instead gives us an account of her “religious-social shaping of technology” theory, a framework developed to illuminate the complex interactions between religious communities and new communication technologies. These foundations thereby reinforce—now at a theoretical level—our broader theme of how far online religion is shaped by its offline points of origin and return.

Jørgen Straarup takes up some of the most intriguing possibilities of new media and Web 2.0—what he calls “avatar religion.” His analysis in “When Pinocchio Goes to Church: Exploring an Avatar Religion” suggests that despite the revolutionary potential of new media, even avatars seek community—community that appears to require precisely the (sometimes very) traditional, real-world communities and practices that serve as the origins and destinations of their virtual counterparts.

As its title “Empirical Investigations,” suggests, chapters in the second section intend to balance and complement our theoretical beginnings with what can be known empirically about contemporary practices and patterns. So, we begin with Peter Fischer-Nielsen, whose “Pastors on the Internet: Online Responses to Secularization” summarizes his extensive analysis of how Danish pastors respond to the communicative possibilities of Web 2.0. Fischer-Nielsen’s research highlights three possible strategies for responding to the challenges new media and Web 2.0 bring in their wake—most bluntly, in terms of a threat of secularization (a threat already felt strongly in highly secular Denmark, where only ca. 4% of the population attend a church on a regular basis).

Contra the tendencies, even today, to hype new media as *new* and thereby *revolutionary*, Lorenzo Cantoni and his colleagues approach the appropriation of new media by the Roman Catholic Church as a “normal stage” in the

development of the Church's activities. Their study, utilizing an international survey, is distinctive, as they interrogate precisely the primary representatives of the church hierarchy—namely, priests and bishops—regarding their understandings of, and responses to, new media. Their quantitative analysis thereby nicely complements the more external analysis of Catholic media usage provided by Campbell.

In "Voting 'Present': Religious Organization Groups on Facebook," Mark D. Johns examines how individuals interact with Facebook groups initiated by diverse religious organizations. Contrary to the hopes of some—i.e., that the more interactive media of Web 2.0 might "empower" individuals to shape, and participate more extensively in, the lives of institutions, including congregations—Johns finds instead that those who join such groups usually just stop there. That is, their action amounts to little more than hitting the "join" or "like" button in Facebook; no further engagement follows. While these actions are of symbolic significance, as they mark and index individuals' religious identity, Johns' findings also serve as a reality check for those institutions that hope that if they make themselves apparent online via such groups, more engagement with their real-world communities will follow.

In their case study, Stine Lomborg and Charles Ess reinforce and complement Johns' findings. The title of their chapter, "'Keeping the Line Open and Warm': An Activist Danish Church and Its Presence on Facebook," quotes a young pastor who deftly uses the social networking site to maintain and refresh extant relationships with congregants. But, as we will discuss more fully below, church leaders and congregants have responded to the various ways that such media may challenge traditional authority and hierarchies with a renegotiation process that takes on board some of the affordances of the new media, but only insofar as these complement and reinforce the real-world community.

Pauline Hope Cheong's "Twitter of Faith: Understanding Social Media Networking and Microblogging Rituals as Religious Practices" focuses on how believers seek to appropriate and exploit micro-blogs such as Twitter for a variety of community-building purposes, including evangelism, mediation, and prayer. Echoing the thematic of "church as brand," Cheong finds that blogging practices contribute to the construction of "faith brands," as such practices encourage both loyalty to church leadership as well as church growth through evangelism. The chapter also discusses some of the potential advantages of microblogging as a religious practice, as well as its more shady side, and suggests multiple areas for future research.

The last chapter in this section, by Tim Hutchings, represents one of the most extensive investigations into online churches through participant-observation methodology that we know of. His "Creating Church Online: