Religious Authority in the Age of the Internet

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As the Internet changes how we interact with one another, it transforms our understanding of authority by creating new positions of power, flattening traditional hierarchies, and providing new platforms that give voice to the voiceless. How is it reshaping Christian leadership and institutions of authority?

Since its emergence the Internet has often been presented as a revolutionary tool, transforming society in a myriad of ways, from how we do business, educate youth, perform our daily tasks, and even live out our religious lives. The Internet has become not only a tool facilitating new forms of network interactions, but an environment that is changing how we perceive and interact with one another. It is transforming our understanding of authority by creating new positions of power, flattening traditional hierarchies, and providing new platforms that give voice to the voiceless. The ability of the Internet to challenge traditional political, social, and even religious authorities has become an accepted assumption. As the diversity and breadth of Internet users has increased, more people have been given access to a global audience for their ideas, creating new sources of authority.

In this article we will explore how the Internet may alter our understanding of religious authority and the challenges this can pose to churches and Christian communities. We begin with a brief history of Christian attitudes and approaches towards the Internet as a technology and its uses by individuals and communities. Then we offer a model for considering the interplay between media use and changing patterns of authority, in order

to highlight key questions and challenges that Internet use brings to structures and institutions of authority in modern Christianity.

CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES TOWARD THE INTERNET

Arguably, Christian computer enthusiasts were some of the first religious adopters and innovators of the Internet. In the 1980s hobbyists and computer professionals began to experiment with ways to use this new technology to facilitate religious conversation and interactions through email and BBS systems like Usenet. These forums gave space for individuals to debate spiritual issues and exchange prayer requests. In the 1990s, at the introduction of the World Wide Web, Christian groups produced Web sites and resources that offered online religious seekers new opportunities to learn about the faith. Christian email lists (such as the ecumenical email listserve Ecunet) and even virtual congregations or cyberchurches appeared online. While some of these online environments were electronically linked to offline groups who aimed to reproduce some aspects of conventional church life, there were other online churches that existed solely on the Internet with no equivalent structure offline.

The Internet also gave people new opportunities to spread their faith through what Andrew Careaga called "e-vangelism." His *E-vangelism: Sharing the Gospel in Cyberspace* offered guidelines for creating witness-focused Web sites and doing evangelism in online chat rooms.[1] With the rise of Web 2.0, Christians continue to take their share their faith through new social media — making religious-themed group pages on Facebook and creating alternative spaces such as GodTube.com, a Christian version of the popular video-sharing site YouTube.

The Internet continues to provide Christians with new ways to explore religious beliefs and experiences through a growing number of Web sites, chat rooms, and email discussion groups dedicated to a variety of faith-related issues. These new opportunities are readily embraced by some, but met with skepticism by others. Christian scholars offer a variety of interpretations of the promises and perils posed by Internet technology. The spectrum of their critique of the Internet ranges from warnings about the potential seduction and deception of Internet technology and the virtual worlds it helps create, to enthusiastic advocacy of the Internet as an essential tool for Christian ministries.[2] In the middle are approaches that raise theological concerns while considering the benefits the Internet offers to religious community.[3]

For example, one notable criticism involves the potentially deceptive nature of the virtual realities created through disembodied interaction on the Internet. When we interact with one another through simulations formed by images on a computer screen, Graham Houston warns in *Virtual Morality*, we may lose touch with our faith that the reality and value of human beings are grounded in their creation in God's image.[4] In *Habits of the High-Tech Heart*, Quentin Schultze echoes this concern that the form of Internet inter-

actions can threaten genuine Christian community, communication, and reciprocity.[5]

Yet equally notable is the argument by some Christian theologians and computer executives that the Internet empowers people to reconnect with religious beliefs in postmodern society by providing them opportunities to explore spiritual time and space in electronic environments.[6] The Internet in some respects models the experience of pilgrimage through unknown lands to find and experience God or the sacred. Many would agree with Father Pierre Babin and Sister Angela Ann Zukowski that the challenges the Internet poses to the Church should not cause people of faith to shy away from the potential benefits that can come from sharing traditional presentations of the gospel with new technologies.[7]

While it is important to reflect on the debates over the potential influence of the Internet on Christian belief and practice, it is also important to consider the research scholars have undertaken regarding Christian practice online. In the past decade a growing number of empirical studies have examined the impact of the Internet on Christianity. For instance, Glenn Young shows that the different expressions of "Internet Christianity" surfacing online—ranging from providing traditional religious information and forms of Christian practice (such as online stations of the cross) to hosting virtual worship services—is not unconnected to offline Christianity.[8] Theologian Debbie Herring argues that an online Christian newsgroup may be understood as a community whose distinctive theological methods, doctrines, and praxis are closely linked to traditional theological sources and processes.[9] While the Internet provides Christians a new context for creating community and organic theology, it is still clearly connected to offline religion. Michael Laney's in-depth study of Christian Web site users shows they primarily employ the Internet to connect with information and establish relationships that reinforce personal beliefs.[10] Thus, the "faith factor" surfaces as a prime motivator and determinant of use, whether it leads to seeking religious information or a community of faith online.

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What is crucial in all the discussions outlined above is that the Internet is not a value-neutral technology. The Internet has entered society with the promise of facilitating free speech and access to information. Some Christians

receive this promise with hope for the flourishing of the gospel message and for the promotion of justice and equality. Others fear the spread of false and harmful messages, and the promotion of behaviors that exacerbate social isolation and disconnection from local communities.

CHALLENGES TO RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

One of the core concerns raised for religious groups by the Internet is how online engagement changes our understanding of religious authority. The discussions here are complex, in part because researchers pose the issue of "religious authority" in different ways. Is it a question of how the Internet may influence or subvert traditional religious hierarchies (e.g., denominational structures or theological training systems for clergy)? Is the Internet giving rise to new leaders who serve as religious interpreters of theological ideas or spiritual guides for groups? Do online texts mirror or re-frame traditional religious texts and systems of interpretation? How does online religious discourse transform people's understanding of commonly held Christian teaching, or of a specific group's religious identity?

Some scholars think the non-hierarchical nature of the Internet is a serious challenge to traditional religious structures. Lorne Dawson speculates that the Internet will result in the "proliferation of misinformation and disinformation" by opponents of particular religious groups or disgruntled insiders, the "loss of control over religious materials" by religious organizations, and provide "new opportunities for grassroots forms of witnessing" that encourage the rise of unofficial or alternative voices to traditional discourses.[11] In general, the Internet's potential to enable users to transcend time, geography, and traditional channels of protocol may encourage practices and discourses that bypass or subvert the authority of accepted religious structures or leaders. For example, offline religious organizations have expressed concern about bringing normally closed private policy or theological discussions of religious leaders into public Internet forums where new conclusions may arise that "stewards of the public image, would wish to deemphasize."[12] Some worry the Internet will create new religious authorities, such as the moderator of an online group being identified and treated as a legitimate spiritual authority by members of an online religious community.[13]

However, other research has questioned these assumptions and suggested the Internet may empower traditional religious authorities. Eileen Barker notes that certain religious organizations—namely, strongly hierarchical religious cults—infiltrate online groups in attempts to control information shared online or create alternative forums that reinforce their established structures.[14] In their study of Haredi Jewish communities in Israel, Karine Barzilai-Nahon and Gadi Barzilai find that elites can use the Internet to control information flow and access in several ways.[15] Religious leaders may bring public pressure on members who post information online that is perceived as hostile or challenging to the community, condemn the Internet publicly so that its

use is seen as a mark of rebellion against the community, and attempt to limit availability of technology required to access the Internet.

Some features of the Internet that have been identified as new challenges to religious authority are not really unique to this technology. The critiques of the Internet's potential influence on the Church strongly echo concerns, raised for decades, about the impact of television and especially televangelism. Some Christians welcomed television as potentially transforming evangelism and missions, anticipating that the "electronic church" would attract a mass audience for the gospel who could not otherwise be reached. Others feared that audience would "tune-in and drop-out" of offline church. Research has shown that neither is the case. Televangelism audiences are often comprised of religious conservatives who are marginalized in their local faith communities; religious broadcasts provide them with rituals through which they find a sense of purpose and belonging.[16] Thus, these viewers generally are not the "unreached"; rather, they often have a congregational affiliation. Mass media, then, can be readily used for religious purposes, but claims about its potential blessings and harms to traditional religious institutions have often been exaggerated.

Other features of the Internet provide truly distinctive opportunities or threats to religious institutions. The interactive nature of network technologies allows people not only to access alternative sources of information, but also to create their own news outlets through a variety of social media platforms like blogs and Twitter. Users can build social connections and foster relationships that are unlimited by traditional time and space constraints. Networked mobile technologies also allow people to be present in different ways in local gatherings; for instance, church members can use their iPhones to check their preacher's facts during a sermon.

> The Internet challenges traditional religious authority in several ways. It offers easy access to information, alternative spaces to report on and reinterpret leaders' claims, and opportunities to create new online rituals and social practices.

These new features of social media can pose a challenge for traditional authority in several ways. The Internet offers users easy access to information; they can seek answers to questions without having to go through traditional gatekeepers or interpreters of information, such as a pastor or youth group leader. It offers alternative spaces to discuss what leaders teach in church: members can use blogs to report on, critique, or reinterpret leaders' claims through their own theological lenses. Finally,

on the Internet members can create new online rituals and social practices to express their beliefs: in online Bible studies, prayer groups, and even cyberchurches they can reinvent church practices and spiritual disciplines.

These challenges to religious authority, however, need to be put into the larger context of changing social patterns and attitudes toward religious institutions in Western society. Even before the rise of the Internet, people's lifestyles were becoming increasingly mobile and they tended to identify less with a local congregation or Christian denomination. Increasingly their religious identities are tied to personalized networks of friends and acquaintances they know through telecommunication technologies, rather than to local religious communities bound together by geographic and family ties. Congregations exist in a marketplace of organizations, denominations, and associations that compete with one another to attract membership or gain a voice in the public sphere. Because the mass media play such a central role in that marketplace, religious authorities become answerable to the television and radio journalists who present them to viewers and listeners, to promote, criticize, or challenge their messages and authority.

While the Internet may be seen as a catalyst facilitating this pattern of change, in many respects it is just the newest component on the media landscape that shapes practices and patterns already emerging in the religious marketplace. So when considering what impact the Internet may have on the authority of people and structures in traditional religious institutions, we must think about why people seek information from sources outside their churches. We must also consider what attracts people to the Internet as a place to gain information and to connect with others, and why they choose some online sources over others.

THE IMPACT OF THE INTERNET

Here we will focus on three ways that the Internet is transforming the authority of religious leaders and institutions.

The Internet is changing how we understand Christian community and, therefore, how we gain and maintain religious identity. As people connect online and form networks of relationships that extend beyond connections within congregations, the organizational structures of traditional denominations have less power in determining religious identities. Consider the following story as an example.

> Casey has recently moved to the area and is looking for a congregation to connect with. She was previously a member of a Baptist congregation in a different city, but spent a lot of time talking with people from other churches at *churchoffools.co.uk*. One of her online friends tells her about an Anglican church in her new neighborhood. There she meets some parishioners who ask her about her story. One parishioner asks her why she has not checked out the nearby Baptist church, or even Methodist church (knowing the *churchoffools.co.uk* is run by

the Methodist denomination in Great Britain). Casey responds, "Those words mean nothing to me."

The Internet fuels a challenge to the traditional hierarchical and familial understanding of community (held by the parishioner who asks about Casey's denominational affiliation). Casey, who connects with people from various Christian backgrounds both online and offline, considers her affiliation as more fluid, and less bound by a particular location and its history.

The words and actions of religious leaders are increasingly susceptible to scrutiny by alternative voices online. This is impacting the authority of leaders within churches offline. Arguably, it would be difficult for a person who has high standing in an offline church community to carry that authority into many online environments. The Internet favors certain discursive and symbolic practices that may seem alien in modern Christianity. Many social media platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube, do not lend themselves to formal theological discourse as found in sermons. Small pieces of text, videos, and links to other online sources have become the currency of social interaction on these sites. Here is an extreme, but important example.

> Frustration and anger got the better of the Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Melbourne on an afternoon in 2006. Storming out of his cloister, he used all the strength in his voice and gestures to shoo away a group of young people who were loitering and skate-boarding on the church's grounds. The young people reciprocated with taunts, apparently entertained by the old man's loss of composure. An argument ensued, and the priest resorted to racist and slanderous abuse against the group.[17] If this event had not been recorded on one young person's mobile camera, it would have fallen into obscurity, joining so many other ignored urban battles young people often experience in Australian cities. But in July 2007 it was discovered on YouTube, a popular video-file sharing site, by both domestic and overseas mainstream media journalists. The Dean's displayed behavior attracted criticism from the general public, and, despite the support of his colleagues in the archdiocese, he felt forced to resign from his post at the cathedral.[18]

This episode shows how online media platforms have become places for users to examine the authority of religious figures from a different perspective. In the age of television, many religious leaders have undergone scrutiny by journalists and presenters. In the online media era, anyone with a camera and access to YouTube is empowered to expose and criticize public figures.

Internet culture is challenging traditional Christian structures, especially those that appraise and correct theological knowledge. Just as the words and actions of religious leaders are susceptible to scrutiny by online sources,

so the Internet can create spaces for people to re-examine the doctrines, symbols, and practices of religious traditions. The following two stories may serve as illustrations.

> Megan is a member of a conservative Christian community. Since going to university she has developed a keen interest in eco-feminism. She started a personal Web log where she journals her thoughts on the relationship between faith, politics, and the environment. Through her blog she has had many conversations with like-minded Christians and has formed a group called "Three Places," a small network of bloggers who discuss common topics and share links to each other's sites. She is asked whether she feels more at home, or more supported in her faith development, at Three Places or in her local congregation. She answers, "I need both. My church makes me feel grounded, and the relationships are more real. But there are questions that I have that I can't ask at that church. The people I have met at Three Places are great, and it's really good to have that space to ask those questions. But all of our conversations are topic-based. It's not really church."

> Enrique is a priest at a small Catholic parish. One Sunday the number of attendees triples when the extended family of a child comes for his baptism. While Enrique conducts the ceremony, he notices that many of the visiting young people are texting on their mobile phones. He is perturbed by this because he thinks they are not really paying attention to him or their family. After the Mass, one of these young people approaches Enrique to talk about the ceremony. The youth mentions to him that he has sent one of Enrique's prayers to Twitter, and has received some responses from the young person's friends. One friend is concerned about the mention of Satan during the ceremony, so the youth asks Enrique why Satan is talked about in Catholic Masses. Enrique realizes that these young people, while texting, have been more attentive to the service than he presumed. Moreover, Enrique's audience during the ceremony has actually been larger than the number of people inside the church building, and involved in a conversation of which he could not be part.

For people like Megan, who may feel dissatisfied with church practices or at times unable to voice their opinions and concerns, the Internet offers an alternative place to examine Christian doctrine and practice. Enrique has discovered that the Internet offers a setting for interaction that is free from the constraints and control of religious authority.

REFLECTIONS ON AUTHORITY ONLINE

Issues of religious authority online are complex. As we have argued, it is not simply the presence of the Internet as new technology and the unique features it offers that creates challenges for religious community. It is how

Christians use these new technologies combined with larger cultural shifts in how religion is practiced in contemporary Western society that challenge traditional religious leaders, institutions, and patterns of religious life. Like newspapers, radio, and television, the Internet is another media platform for the public scrutiny of religious leaders and the exploration and critique of Christian practices and doctrines outside ecclesial control. The Internet also fuels an already shifting pattern of sociability among people for whom connections are fluid, mobile, and transcend space and time.

Yet the key challenge the Internet poses to traditional structures of religious authority is the democratization of knowledge online. The Internet not only increases access to alternative sources of religious information, but empowers people to contribute information, opinions, and experiences to public debates and conversations. This means Christians must develop new skills in technological literacy. They also need new skills of discernment to see how the Internet has created a new social sphere that facilitates spiritual interactions, establishes new authorities, and legitimizes practices for their community.

NOTES

1 Andrew Careaga, *E-vangelism: Sharing the Gospel in Cyberspace* (Lafayette, LA: Vital Issues Press, 1999).

2 For instance, the articles in *Virtual Gods: The Seduction of Power and Pleasure in Cyberspace* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1999), edited by Tal Brook, are largely cautionary, while Patrick Dixon's *Cyberchurch: Christianity and the Internet* (Eastborne, UK: Kingsway Publications, 1997) enthusiastically embraces the technology.

3 Douglas Groothuis's *The Soul in Cyberspace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997) is representative of this mediating position.

4 Graham Houston, *Virtual Morality: Christian Ethics in the Computer Age* (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1998).

5 Quentin J. Schultze, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002). See Jason Byassee's review of this book in "Living Virtuously in the Virtual Age" on pp. 82-87 of this issue.

6 See, for example, Jennifer Cobb, *Cybergrace: The Search for God in the Digital World* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1998), and Walter P. Wilson, *The Internet Church* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishing, 2001).

7 Pierre Babin and Angela Ann Zukowski, *The Gospel in Cyberspace: Nurturing Faith in the Internet Age* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2002).

8 Glenn Young, "Reading and Praying Online: The Continuity in Religion Online and Online Religion in Internet Christianity," in Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan, eds., *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 86-97.

9 Debbie Herring, "Virtual as Contextual: A Net News Theology," in Morten T. Højsgaard and Margrit Warburg, eds., *Religion and Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 149-165.

10 Michael Laney, "Christian Web Usage: Motives and Desires," in *Religion and Cyberspace*, 166-179.

11 Lorne Dawson, "Researching Religion in Cyberspace: Issues and Strategies," in Jeffery Hadden and Douglas Cowan, eds., *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and*

Promises, Religion and the Social Order, volume 8 (New York: JAI Press, 2001), 25-54, here citing 43-44.

12 David Piff and Margrit Warburg, "Seeking for Truth: Plausibility on a Baha'i Email List," in   Højsgaard and Warburg, op. cit., 86-101.

13 Herring, op. cit.

14 Eileen Barker, "Crossing the Boundary: New Challenges to Religious Authority and Control as a Consequence of Access to the Internet," in   Højsgaard and Warburg, op. cit., 67-85.

15 Karine Barzilai-Nahon and Gadi Barzilai, "Cultured Technology: Internet and Religious Fundamentalism," *The Information Society* 21:1 (2005), 25-40.

16 Bobby C. Alexander, *Televangelism Reconsidered*: *Ritual in the Search for Human Community* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1994).

17 Barbara McMahon, "Priest's Racist Rant Posted on YouTube," *The Guardian,* August 1, 2007, *www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/aug/01/australia.mainsection* (accessed November 30, 2010).

18 Barney Zwartz, "Swearing Priest Resigns as Dean," *The Age* (Melbourne), August 20, 2007, *www.theage.com.au/news/national/swearing-priest-resigns-as-dean/2007/08/20/1187462178260.html* (accessed November 30, 2010).

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