



Exploring Religious Community Online

We are One in the Network

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introduction

We are One in The Spirit; We are One in The Lord.
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored.
And they'll know we are Christians by our love.
("We are One in The Spirit," Peter Scholte, 1966, licensed F.E.L.)

In the twenty-first century community is a term that is being debated and redefined. Community can be used to denote a forced social gathering of those who live in a given region, or a chosen partnering of people for a common purpose. Discussion about the nature of community may recognize our global interconnectedness or describe separation of people into selective relationships that affirm personal beliefs and values. Yet, increasingly community is seen as something people choose, rather than something that chooses them.

The trend toward selective, specialized relationships, which may be used to negotiate through an increasingly depersonalized world, has a certain resonance with ideas of community coming out of 1960s hippie communal culture. Reacting against the perceived controlling "establishment," and advocating peace, love, and unity, groups of people broke through traditional boundaries to experiment with new forms of community. At this time a religious counterculture also emerged. The "Jesus People" movement similarly was characterized by its pulling away from mainstream society to create new living spaces of faith. Communal living challenged traditional views of community, in some case invoking fear about the effects of "turning on" and "dropping out." Around campfires across the United States in the 1960s, along with the echoes of "Kumbaya," these experimental social groups sang songs about their expectations and visions: "We are one in the spirit... And we pray that all unity

may one day be restored.” By walking side by side in new ways, they hoped to transform their world. By the way they lived, they hoped to mark themselves as unique, representing something new.

Four decades later another revolution has taken place, an information revolution that has spurred a new generation of social gatherings. The internet has become the campfire around which people gather to tell their stories, meet people, and form relationships. Through the network of the internet, people are seeking to build social groups that challenge traditional ideas of community. But can people really experience community online? Can we really become one through a computer network?

Community Online?

In this “congregation” we can’t hide much. We don’t stay isolated in our bubbles with our own burdens and struggles. We get stripped of our masks (they don’t work well by email). Although we are from all over the world, all different from each other, our distinctiveness from each other has lost its separateness.... Can anything else live this out more than an email “congregation” where we know nothing about each other than the common bond of Christ—the bond of LOVE? (Email sent to Community of Prophecy, 24 Mar 1998, Subject: school feedback)

At hundreds of computer screens all over the globe, individuals are logging on to their email accounts, and sorting through a myriad of messages: junk email, correspondence from friends, work-related email, and the daily postings of an email list. Many email users would consider themselves members of an “online community,” a group formed through online communication. Email discussion lists take many different forms: self-help advice groups, fan clubs, friendship networks, political discussions, religious prayer groups. They attract people from different backgrounds and with different agendas.

Some discussion list members are “lurkers,” staying in the virtual shadows of the groups, reading but not posting, their names only known to the computer that facilitates subscriptions to the list. Some members become well-known characters on the lists, as frequent posters. Others are infrequent posters with degrees of participation depending on time and interest in current discussion. There are also members who moderate or guide group discussions and look after the technical running of these communities. All of these are members of a community joined through computer wires. They gather in different places, at different times—separate, but together. This community is drawn together for a common, specialized interest, and sustained through the internet. But can a group of people, who gather solely through email, truly be regarded as a community? Can online relationships be as authentic as interactions taking place in a local church? What is community? What is church?

The emergence of online communities raises these and many other questions. Online communities provide meeting places for people not linked to a physical space. Rather, they are created through the technology of email lists, World Wide Web (WWW), and chat rooms. These electronic tools connect people to others in their local area or around the world. Yet just as attending a church does not make one part of the Christian community, being part of a Christian email list does not mean the group is a community, either. As the number of Christian websites and electronic discussion groups increases, the link between what is the church and what is Christian community needs to be reevaluated. For some, the personal relationships occurring in the online context can become more intimate and valued than those occurring in the local church. When this takes place, individuals may see their Christian community as coming from the online context rather than the place where they “physically” locate themselves for worship each week. Some critics argue that disembodied gatherings and worship online create a false form of community. Still, online socialization and religious pursuits continue to flourish, and research demonstrates that they invigorate the social sphere (Katz and Rice, 2002; Larsen, 2001; Barna, 2001).

The internet has introduced a new terrain needing to be defined and contextualized as well as explored. The term “internet” is used to identify the vast array of wires and computer network connections, and is what most people use when referring to the World Wide Web as they navigate their way through websites and access their email. It is the “network of all networks.” Cyberspace is often used synonymously to refer to the internet. It is seen as a “virtual” world where technology and fantasy meet somewhere beyond the user’s computer screen. In his science fiction novel *Neuromancer*, William Gibson uses the term “cyberspace” to describe the realm the story’s hero enters when he connects a computer directly to his brain. Gibson describes cyberspace as “a consensual hallucination... a graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system... lines of light ranged in the non space of the mind” (Gibson, 1984: 51). This poetic image illustrates how cyberspace and the internet are seen to bring together the real and the virtual in a technological world. The description envisions a mystical realm where people do not simply use technology; they become part of the network.

Virtual reality discussions and images dominated the beginnings of the internet’s proliferation into mainstream culture in the early 1990s, and by the mid-1990s “virtual community” emerged as the newest internet buzzword, describing the group relationships many computer users were forming online. These internet-based communities were seen as new social spaces enabling human interaction in the digital world. Starting as grassroots communities on newsgroups or electronic bulletin boards, virtual communities soon became

facilitated and promoted by commercial websites and e-businesses. By encouraging users to form interest groups around specialized topics they hoped to attract more traffic to their websites. Later the term “virtual community” was dropped in favor of the label “online communities,” as virtual community seemed to infer something false about the relationships that were emerging.

Throughout the 1990s increasing numbers of people sought out and created online communities, ranging from such diverse topics as stamp collecting to African politics or single parenting. Online communities combine traditional traits of community in a new setting. They occur as individuals assemble through internet technology to form networks of interdependent relationships based on common vision, care, and communication. At the same time as community online emerged, the internet became seen as a social sphere as much as an information-gathering tool.

As internet use and digital social interaction increase, researchers have found making the distinction between “online” and the “offline” context or “real world” crucial in order to describe this phenomenon and compare these with manifestations of community offline. “Online” is applied to that which takes place in a computer network environment, such as interaction facilitated through the internet. The “real world” refers to public and private interactions in daily life occurring within the physical world. Similarly, the term “offline” is used to describe any facet of life occurring away from the computer screen. Often the distinction between the two blurs, as people take advantage of the internet’s absence of social cues to experiment with new identities and ways of being. In the late 1990s, discussion of online religion and cyberchurch began to surface as proponents and pundits of technology began to be concerned about the potential effects technology was having on the culture of religion. Fears emerged that online religion would cause people to abandon their pews in exchange for worship via the keyboard and computer screen, further effecting the steady decline of “real world” church attendance. Many in traditional offline churches, those functioning in the physical world tied to a specific geography such as a local church or a denomination, see the internet simply as a threat or a new sphere for proselytizing. Online religion, the presentation of religious beliefs and practices online, has become a phenomenon of religious innovation and the repackaging of spirituality; it also creates deep suspicion and mistrust. In a new millennium, online religion and online community continue to be topics of debate.

The idea of community being created in a faceless, technologically constructed space is problematic in many respects. Embedded in this apprehension is the belief that “disembodied” spiritual practice is inauthentic, or at least severely impoverished. Yet some have argued the internet facilitates new, vibrant forms of spiritual engagement and connection (Zaleski, 1997; Brasher,

2001a). For those who have felt disappointed or disconnected in their experiences of local religious community, the internet provides an interesting option. This is the possibility of being together alone or being alone together.

Picture the great cathedrals of Europe. These vast stone buildings with their towering Gothic spires or Romanesque arches have been described as “early examples of virtual reality, their size and scale out of proportion to ordinary life” helping reinforce the “other-worldly aspects of Christianity” (Sherman and Judkins, 1992: 221). Inside, the congregation gathers for worship faithfully each Sunday, yet individual members and visitors often enter alone, sit alone, and leave alone. They are gathered together, yet in this gathering they realize this sense of loneliness; they are together alone.

Now picture a computer in a home or office, a sanctuary away from the rest of the world. Imagine the individual logged on to a chat room; maybe this is a weekly prayer group they faithfully plug into. As they watch the discussion scroll across their screen individuals in the group are aware of their presence indicated on the right side of the screen. If they are silent too long, they might receive a personal note from a group member asking them to join in. A frequent attendee’s presence may command a sort of respect within the group, giving a kind of authority to the individual who types in comments that show up on other members’ screens. Each individual on the channel may be alone, with only the computer screen for company, but the technology shows that each separate person is linked to a greater collective, a global community of like minds and spirits. They are alone together.

During my research into religious community and the internet, I experienced both of these types of encounters. Online community is not the same as embodied interaction. Yet when offline options do not provide the spiritual connection many individuals long for, it can become, as one member of a Christian email list stated, a “Godsend.” The experience of being alone in proximity, yet seemingly together through an internet connection, provides comfort for many, knowing there is another space where these desires for connection and spiritual input can be realized. For this reason many individuals continue to search for God on the internet, thus posing a challenge to the religious culture and community. For this reason online religious communities need to be more deeply investigated.

In Search of Online Community

My search to understand community in the online world began in 1997 with an essay entitled “Virtual Communities in Cyberspace,” written as part of a Masters-level course in the Theology and Ethics of Communication at the University of Edinburgh. Through a year of exploring the then new and