

Working Paper # 7

(Kertas Kerja # 7)

**'CLICK HERE FOR RELIGION':
SELF-PRESENTATION OF RELIGION ON THE INTERNET**

(This article was published in *Verbum SVD* 2007, 48(2):135-147)
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Januari 2008

**Institute of Indonesia Tenggara Studies
(East Nusa Tenggara Studies)**

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‘CLICK HERE FOR RELIGION’: SELF-PRESENTATION OF RELIGION ON THE INTERNET¹

*Gabriel Faimau**

Abstract:

The growth of the Internet use in the era of computer technology has influenced all aspects of human interaction and society, including religion. Is the Internet a blessing or a curse for religion? Sociological studies have identified a replacement of institutional religion by a new social form of religion following the decline of people’s participation in organised religious affairs. Some thinkers even predict the demise of religion. This paper argues that rather than replacing, the Internet provides more spaces as a venue that allows people to get more information and to gain more spiritual formation through the medium of cyberspace. In other words, on one hand, religion finds another space on the Internet to articulate and communicate its messages. On the other hand, online religion motivates and enables people for more participation in religious affairs.

The birth of the Internet in computer technology has been celebrated as part of modern life. This can be seen in the rate of the Internet use that has been phenomenal in the past two decades since the web development gained its speed and momentum in society. The significant growth in the use of the Internet goes along with its influence. As a phenomenon, the Internet brings a global revolution characterised by the flowing of information in our everyday life. The Internet also provides different images in this digital era that touch all aspects of society and provides things for easy access as seen in the popular phrase, “what you see is what you get.”

With its growth and influence, the Internet has been part of human interaction and society on a daily basis. One of the areas touched by the Internet is religion. Facing this fact, we may ask this question: is the Internet a blessing or a curse for religion? This essay is an attempt to answer this question by identifying how religion presents itself on the Internet,

¹ (This article was published in *Verbum SVD* 2007, 48(2):135-147)

the stand of the Internet before religion and the Internet users and the difference contributed to religion by the Internet. To give a better shape to the whole discussion, a theoretical consideration to examine the presence of religion on the Internet will be first discussed. This theoretical framework will direct our discussion in order to have a critical view on the self-presentation of religion in the Internet.

Religion Online and Online Religion

Religion has a long history of employing new and innovative technology to proclaim and spread its varied messages (Hadden and Cowan 2000:7; O’Leary 2004:38-40). Following the evolutionary theory of Walter J. Ong on communication and culture, religion has amazingly employed communication technology through a series of stages from “primary orality” to “secondary orality.” Primary orality is the stage of pre-literacy where a culture is totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or printing. In this stage, traditional stories, proverbs, prayers and formulaic expressions are inherited through a purely oral tradition. In contrast to primary orality, secondary orality is a stage where culture is well-equipped with high technology of writing and printing (Ong [1982] 1988).

The secondary orality is now characterised by electronic media. The invention of electronic media is remarkable because it combines sounds, voice, image and gesture that enable people to use more senses in understanding the social world. The presence of the Internet gives space for religion and religion finds a place in cyberspace. In this space, different websites dealing with different aspects of religious systems are created and religions present themselves to web-travellers. Christianity for a long period has dominated the audio and video airwaves. However, e-space is not limited to one religion, as Hadden and Cowan interestingly note that there is scarcely a religious tradition, movement, group, or phenomenon absent entirely from the Net (Hadden and Cowan 2000:8). Now the question arises, how does religion present itself in the cyber-space?

Helland provides a useful account for understanding the self-presentation of religion on the Internet. He argues that religion manifests itself on the Internet in two different forms, namely *religion online* and *online religion*. According to Helland, *religion online* is based upon traditional religious hierarchical structure that sees the Internet as a tool of top-down

organised communication. It is a controlled environment. This use of the Internet is an organised attempt to utilise traditional forms of communication to present religion based upon a vertical conception of control, status and authority. On religion online, the Internet is a tool of communication. On the other hand, *online religion* represents a new development of religious praxis with new forms of communication and the ideal of unstructured, open and non-hierarchical interaction. This second form offers Internet users a form of religious liminality outside of traditional religious structure. On online religion, the Internet is a place of interaction (Helland 2000:205-233; 2002:294).

Modifying this theoretical framework of Helland, Hadden and Cowan describe religion online as a form that provides *information about* religion such as doctrines, services and tradition. They then describe online religion as an invitation to the cyberspace travelers to *participate* in religious practices via the web. Online religion argues the Internet users into bringing religion into praxis. This online religion ranges from online prayer, meditation, Catholic Masses, Hindu ceremony, the Wiccan Sabbat, to spiritual counselling, sermons or homilies, Tarot readings, faith sharing and astrological charts (Hadden and Cowan 2000:8-9; Dawson and Cowan 2004:7). In addition, the theoretical framework argued by Helland can be developed in two other terms: *information* and *formation*. On one hand religion online provides *information* and on the other hand, online religion offers *formation* to the Internet users. By providing information, religion online presents itself in the hope that the Internet users may gain more knowledge. By offering formation, online religion comes into contact with the Internet users for personal religious decision or renewal or simply prayer request.

Moreover, Young interestingly makes a distinction concerning the locus of activity to which an Internet site makes primary reference. Young argues that since it provides information about religion, religion online makes primary reference to offline, preexisting religious traditions and institutions. On the other side, since it invites Internet users for participation, online religion refers to the online environment itself as the primary context of that activity (Young 2004:94). Young goes on with the suggestion to treat this distinction as identifying the end points of a continuum and not as a dichotomy where religion on the

Internet involves two things: activity and locus of activity (Dawson and Cowan 2004:7; Young 2004:93). In activity, we see how religion presents itself on the Internet in the form of providing information and inviting users for participation. The act of self-presentation on the Internet is therefore an activity initiated by religion. And in the locus of activity, we see the primary reference, context and place of religion's self-presentation.

Should we then strictly keep the distinction between religion online and online religion? How can these two models be explained? As mentioned above, Young argues that the distinction between the two is not absolute. "Religion online and online religion, rather than being strictly opposed, are two types of religious expression and activity that exist in continuity with one another" (Young 2004:93). Having the same idea, Cowan suggests, "It would be too easy to designate the distinction according to the websites which provide one or the other – either religion online or online religion. While there are sites which operate solely in one domain or the other, the vast majority of websites seek to bridge the two" (Cowan 2002 cited in Young 2004:94). This argument of Cowan is interesting since it deals with the question of how the two concepts operate in different websites. We cannot strictly separate religion online and online religion simply because these two forms operate on the same stage with an inseparable purpose just like information and formation relate to each other. However, we need to keep in mind that the understanding of activity and locus of activity of religion online and online religion gives us a theoretical foundation for broadening research on the relation and interaction between religion and Internet users through the Internet.

Internet: Medium and Message

The above theoretical framework provides us with a way to analyse the stand of the Internet between religion and the Internet users. We may ask, what is the meaning of the Internet presence for both religion and Internet users? In his very important book, *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan gives a very interesting account on the personal and social consequences of media in social life. McLuhan argues that in the operational and practical fact of media in modern culture, the medium is the message (McLuhan [1965] 2003:19).

Walter J. Ong later calls the idea of McLuhan as the “medium” model and gives his new account on human communication with its demands for anticipated feedback (Ong [1982] 1988: 175-177).

In the light of Ong’s account, we can see the stand of the Internet before religion and its users in two ways: *medium without message* and *medium with message*. As medium without message, the Internet is a tool used by religion for its self-presentation. Here the Internet functions as a medium that connects religion to the users. Message belongs to religion and this message is given to the Internet users through the Internet. Ong argues that “thinking of a ‘medium’ of communication or of ‘media’ of communication suggests that communication is a pipeline transfer of units of material called ‘information’ from one place to another” (Ong [1982] 1988:176). Regarding religion on the Internet, religion takes a unit of information, encodes it and puts it on the web. This ‘information’ proceeds to the other end, where the Internet users decode and restore it. The information therefore is moved from religion as sender to the Internet users as receiver. In this case, for religion, the Internet merely stands as a medium to transmit its messages, whereas for its users, the Internet is a medium to obtain knowledge on religious aspects and affairs.

Our second focus is now on the Internet as a medium with message. According to McLuhan, the “message” of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs. The medium is the message because “it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action” (([1965] 2003: 20). Turning to our discussion, it could be argued that the Internet stimulates and enlarges the scale of communication between religion and the Internet users. Following the idea of Ong, with the Internet, religion is not only in the sender position but also in the receiver position before it can send anything to its users. In advance, religion needs to know what is in the mind of the Internet users and the Internet users must understand religion because by sending its messages through the Internet, religion anticipates people’s responses (Ong [1982] 1988:176-177). The Internet in this case creates a new kind of interaction between the two. Religion should “make up” itself so that its image can be presentable in a good-looking way on the screen. On the other hand, the Internet users

should face the screen in order to participate in communication with religion. Consequently, the Internet has power to shape and direct both religion and the Internet users.

To what extent does the Internet exercise its power as the message? The Internet creates a unique and new space that “blurs the boundary between the private and the public sphere, allowing for a new form of religious participation in the modern world” (Helland, 2000: 221). With the Internet, control over religion and people’s religious participation has been removed where both religion and people are free to choose the way they want. The Internet also exercises its powers in terms of *forming* religion and the Internet users. The logic behind virtual culture is that the more creative, attractive and presentable a website is, the more visits it may expect. Using this logic, the Internet forms religion to be creative, attractive and presentable. Lyons argues that the integrated communication system based on electronic production weakens the symbolic power of senders who think they can “use” the system, just because the messages have to be recoded for the medium. To the users, the Internet forms them with the idea of “click here to continue” and fulfills their unfinished desire to get more knowledge and participation in religious affairs. People construct religious meanings from different religious materials presented on the Internet, repositioning and patterning them according to their own logic and understanding (Lyon 2000:56-59). This power of forming is in fact controlling at the same time. The Internet is not simply a medium for the transmission of messages from religion or a medium for information and participation in religious affairs. For both religion and the Internet users, the Internet has its own message and therefore religion and the Internet users seem to depend on the effects produced by the Internet.

Internet and Organised Religious Practices

The discussion on the stand of the Internet between religion and the Internet users points out a very important point that as a phenomenon, the Internet has power both as medium and message. Having this idea in mind, we shall now deal with the question regarding religious structure and organised religious practices before the presence of religion online

on the Internet. The question can be formulated this way: Can the Internet replace or change religious structure and organised religious practices?

Religion in the secular world has been a grand topic in sociology. Sociologists have drawn attention on how secularisation hits religion. The decline of religious participation has been identified as one of the effects of secularisation on religion. Reading this decline of religious participation in the secular world, Thomas Luckmann predicts a revolutionary change in religion. According to Luckmann, “what are usually taken as symptoms of the decline of traditional Christianity may be symptoms of a more revolutionary change: the replacement of the institutional specialisation of religion by a new social form of religion” (Luckmann, 1967: 90-91).

The argument of Luckmann is based on his analysis of religion in a secularised society. Luckmann suggests that religion is articulated in two forms: “official” model of religion and the individual religiosity. Individual religiosity initially is patterned after the “official” model of religion. However with the progress in modern world, internalisation of the “official” model becomes difficult. In this regard, religion enters into relations with different institutions whose primary functions are “secular” and religion operates with secular logic guided by secular interests. To this extent, individuals operate in the same way. While the adults are involved in the affairs of everyday life, children are removed from these affairs. When internalisation of ‘official’ religion cannot have space, religion then becomes a private affair and increasingly is transformed into a “subjective” and “private reality” (Luckmann, 1967:80-86). This transformation is clearly seen in the decline of the traditional religion. Luckmann then predicts the replacement of the institutional specialisation of religion by a new social form of religion. However, Luckmann neither explicitly explains the idea of ‘replacement’ and the kind of ‘new social form of religion’ nor provides for us further explanation and a clear picture of how the idea of replacement may work in order to bring the new social form of religion. Luckman’s analysis gets a place in the later research when Heelas and Woodhead clearly show the growth of subjective spirituality on one hand and the decline of congregational domain on the other hand (Heelas and Woodhead 2005: 1-11.49-76). Though a spiritual revolution has not yet taken place,

Heelas and Woodhead find evidence that suggest the replacement of organised religion with holistic spirituality. However, the word “replacement” raises the question of how we understand the whole idea. Does replacement mean that the era of organised religion is over? Perhaps we can argue that rather than replacing, holistic spirituality fills spaces that have been neglected by organised religions.

Going back to our initial question in this section, we can now ask whether religion on the Internet can replace religious structure and organised practices. Responding to this question, Helland argues that religion on the Internet will not replace religious structures or decrease the level of organised religious participation. “Rather, religion on the Internet functions as a supplement, a venue that allows for participation without traditional structures placed upon practitioner” (Helland 2000: 221). Internet of course has proven its influence on religion, but this influence is not *per se* a kind of replacement. Latest studies confirm this claim and show a strong connection between online world and offline world including the arena of religion where religion online mirrors the trend of people merging their online activities with their offline lives (Larsen 2004; Campbell 2005:310). We can therefore conclude that rather than changing or replacing religion, the presence of the Internet develops religion and provides more spaces for religious expression and experience.

Internet: Good News for Religion

In the era where the Internet is considered an electronic frontier, research has consistently revealed how mainstream religions, religious movements and the Internet users find the Internet as a tool and potential new space or a “new mission field” for religious discourse, information, participation and development (Hadden and Cowan (eds.) 2000; Taylor 2003; Dawson and Cowan (eds.) 2004; Brasher 2004; Bunt 2004; Kort 2005). Religious figures from many of the world’s religions themselves acknowledge the investment they have put in the Internet as a tool of religious discourse (Zaleski 1997 cited in Dawson and Hennebry 2004: 156). For religion, the internet is good news. However, is the Internet making a difference for religion?

According to research, by 1999, of the 11,000 Websites focusing upon Christian beliefs and practices in Yahoo's Religion and Spirituality subsection, 7000 (or 64 percent) represented "official" denominations. As of August 2002, the categories of Web sites representing Christian beliefs and practices had increased by over 300 percent (Helland 2004:26). In his study, Horsfall notes different points of the use of the Internet by different Churches. He argues that publicity is an important official use and the Internet provides as well a means to counter negative rumours and critics, publication of extensive religious texts, information on directories of churches, centres and individual members. The Internet is also used to keep the members informed of the latest policies and activities worldwide (Horsfall 2000: 153).

Among the world religions, Roman Catholicism is known as the first religion that promotes the use of the Internet for Evangelisation. This promotion goes side by side with the vision of Pope John Paul II on 'new evangelisation' in the late 1980s that invites a renewal of proclaiming the Gospel in a new way including the use of media communication. Studies often take the Vatican website (www.vatican.va) presenting the Roman Catholicism on the Internet as a good example. This site was created as an official website in 1995. The Vatican site seeks to provide information about and for Roman Catholicism. In the first two weeks, this site had more than 1 million people log on and 200,000 on the first day. In a short period, hundreds of thousands of emails sent to the Pope overwhelmed and crashed the site. By the end of 1996, the Vatican had to upgrade its system that allowed for e-mail to the Pope (Ramo 1996; Horsfall 2000; Helland 2004).

Reforming the conventional way of presenting religious messages is perhaps one of the blessings of the Internet's presence to religion. One of the world organised religions that make use of the Internet as a new way to present their messages is Islam. For the past few decades, the rise of Islam and the discourses on Islam have become a central discussion particularly in the Western world. Along with the striking growth of Islam and discourses on Islam, the Internet plays a very important role to reform Islamic thoughts. The first thing which is very clear is the new way of accessing the Qur'an on the Internet. Studies reveal that while the Qur'an suggests God's words and infinite knowledge cannot be written

down, with the presence of the Internet the Qur'an is made ready for reading in the 'non-conventional' form of a searchable hypertext and through the Internet it is possible to locate numerous indices of recorded recitations (Bunt 2003; 2004:133-134; Kort 2005). This phenomenon indicates a progressive reformation in Islam. Traditionally the Qur'an is God's book and one has to read God's words written in the form of a "book." Now on the Internet, the sacred text is presented in a different form on the screen.

Various studies show that the Internet even helps to form a new understanding of basic concepts within Islam particularly the concepts of *ummah* (community), *ulema* (scholars) and *ijtihad* (interpretation) specifically for Muslims living in the West (Bunt 2004; Kort 2005). *Ummah* is a concept in Islam that sees Muslims worldwide as a community. Since Muslims' websites are accessible all over the world by everyone, the Internet therefore constructs a "new geography of the *ummah*" and brings Muslims closer to one another in online discussions and surfing the web. In this sense, the Internet helps the Muslims to make the idea of *ummah* a reality. Like other religions, Islam has also an elite group of religious leaders and scholars who are experts in Islamic spirituality and teachings. This group is called *ulema*. In the traditional Islamic society, this group had legitimate authority and monopoly over the interpretation (*ijtihad*) of sacred texts since they were the only ones who had access to the Qur'an. With education and the presence of the Internet, now more educated Muslims have access to the sacred texts and cyberspace opens the gate of interpretation to them. Religious knowledge does not become the monopoly of the *ulema* anymore. The Internet increases the possibility for every Muslim to speak of and for Islam without being a scholar.

The example of the Internet's influence in the reformation of Islamic concepts gives us an idea on how powerful the Internet is to religion. Turning to the Internet users, if the Internet makes a difference to the way religions present themselves, the Internet also contributes to the religious experience of its users. A very familiar example used in many studies is the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Larsen 2004: 18-19; Dawson and Cowan 2004). This project finds that the most active online Religion Surfers are also the most active offline participants in their faiths. They see the Internet as a useful tool that enhances their

already deep commitment to their beliefs and their churches, synagogues, or mosques. Regarding faith in praxis, they take their faith seriously in the offline world and use online tools to enrich their knowledge of their faith and to practice their devotions.

The growth of computer mediated-communication indicates a new type of interaction in a “new community” called virtual community. In this community, lasting connections are “made through the Internet, with people making friends, forming support and self-help groups, beginning business partnerships, and finding mates and starting families” (Dawson 2000:36). In the notion of online religion, the Internet provides new space for interaction among religious worshippers and at the same time interaction between religious worshippers and religion itself through sermons, discussions, faith sharing, religious counselling, chat rooms and finding mates with the same religious background. These religious worshippers are united by the same interests. However, the structure of this interaction is characterised by a highly privatised and anonymous structure. In this interaction, “status disappears, no social class has dominion over any other, and everyone is forced into an accommodation of equality” (Helland 2000:215).

The above notes indicate five important points. First, religion remains a factor that influences public and private life. By providing space for religion, the Internet in fact supports and strengthens religion to exercise its “power of controlling” and role of directing the life of people and the real world. Second, some futurists such as Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche had long predicted the demise of religion (Brasher 2004:17). Despite the fact that religion still exists, the Internet develops religion and brings its messages closer and closer to people and society. Third, the Internet empowers religions to transform their conventional ways of presenting themselves to a new one characterised by the more intensive and creative provision of information. Fourth, in the offline world, members of religions have very limited ways of participating in religious affairs and experience. In the online world, the Internet motivates users into more participation in religious affairs that helps in practical life. Fifth, with the anonymity of cyberspace, the Internet facilitates the development of a new unstructured relationship based on the same interests in religious affairs that enables people to express their personal religious beliefs anonymously.

Conclusion

The Internet is a very promising realm for the self-presentation of religion. In an offline world, religion mostly presents itself in a limited space. Now religion finds another space on the Internet that enables it to articulate and communicate its messages to people and society. The Internet becomes a tool that supports and strengthens religion to exercise its power of controlling and giving directions to people and society.

On the other hand, online religion motivates people for more participation in religious affairs. With the intensive use of online religion, the Internet plays a role as a medium with message. However this does not mean that the Internet replaces religion. Rather than changing or replacing religion, in fact the Internet functions as a venue that allows people to get more information and to gain more spiritual formation through the medium of cyberspace.

The Internet is, therefore, a blessing for religion particularly organised religion. The demise of religion has been long predicted but the self-presentation of religion on the Internet again confirms that in the online world, religion still exists and it even finds more spaces and ways of presenting itself. For this reason, in the future web travellers will still “click here for religion” to continue participating in their own organised religion or simply in general religious affairs.

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