

Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Religion and Computer-Mediated Communication

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Previous research on religion and CMC has focused primarily on Christianity and the Western world. The articles collected in this special theme section of the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication examine a wide range of religions online through both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as Hinduism, Shinto, Taoism, Chinese traditions, animism, Japan's New Religions, and diverse forms of Buddhism are examined, in an equally wide range of national cultures and traditions: Israel, Egypt and the Arab world more broadly, India, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, and the United States. Individually and collectively, the articles highlight shared characteristics of religion cross-culturally that foster or hinder religions' migration online—a migration that most, although not all, religions undertake in varying degrees.

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Since God is in everything and is omnipresent, we can devote our every action as an act of worship. Why not, then, use the Internet as another venue for worship? (Hindu Virtual Temple Webmaster, quoted in Jacobs, this issue)

The superficial act of virtual [Shinto] shrine visits threatens to erode the dignity of this traditional shrine-oriented faith and to create misunderstandings. (Kawabata & Tamura, this issue)

As regards technology, there's no quarrel with the advance of technology and Islam because Islam is always for progress. (Muslim lecturer, Singapore, quoted in Cheong & Kluver, this issue)

It has always been the emphasis of the Church that we have to move with time and try to make full use of modern technology and the Internet is one of them to relate

with people and also to share faith in God. (Protestant pastor, Singapore, quoted in Cheong & Kluver, this issue)

Any human being with a heart rejects the killing of children, men, women, elderly people, and all innocent people. (Poster on Maswary [an Arabic-language site], September 12, 2001, quoted in Abdullah, this issue)

Introduction

As Heidi Campbell (2006) noted in her comprehensive overview of research and literature on religion and CMC, the vast majority of scholarship in the English-speaking world has focused on Western traditions, most specifically Christianity. Yet religion—and CMC—are growing phenomena worldwide. Thus the editors of this special theme section of the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* sought to cultivate and collect research from a broader, cross-cultural perspective.

This collection began with a panel presentation on “Japanese Religions and ICTs,” organized by Professor Akira Kawabata as part of the 19th World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions held in Tokyo, Japan on March 30, 2005. In that panel, we wanted to examine how and why uses of CMC might vary among specific religious traditions, both *within* a shared culture (primarily within Japan and within the United States) and *across* diverse cultures (again, primarily Japan and the U.S.). While this initial collaboration helped provide some initial responses to these questions, it was clear that additional research and insight were needed in order to address these questions in a more comprehensive and well-grounded fashion. Happily, the senior editor of *JCMC*, Dr. Susan Herring, encouraged us to develop a special issue of the journal that would attract a wider range of research that would help illuminate these core questions. Even more happily, a large number of scholars and researchers responded to our call for articles.

The result is a collection of 10 articles that examine religion online through a wide range of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The articles represent an extensive range of religious traditions: the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as Hinduism, Shinto, Taoism, Chinese traditions, animism, Japan’s New Religions, and diverse forms of Buddhism. The religions in turn are examined in their specific contexts in an equally wide range of national cultures and traditions: Israel, Egypt and the Arab world more broadly, India, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, and the United States. Both individually and collectively, the articles in this collection contribute to the overarching goals of fostering more comprehensive, nuanced, and cross-cultural knowledge of the complex interactions among diverse religious traditions and their interactions with CMC technologies and venues as these traditions—with important but few exceptions—migrate online.

Characteristics Supporting or Hindering Religious Migration Online

The analyses collected here contribute significant insights concerning both the scope of the migration of diverse religions online and the factors that appear to foster or hinder this migration. To begin with, over against an initial suspicion regarding online environments that was not uncommon in the 1990s, especially on the part of more conservative traditions (cf. Ess, 2001), Christopher Helland observes here that by 2006, “This medium has been embraced by most of the world religious traditions, to the point that not having Internet representation is a rarity for a religious organization, even if it is luddite in its beliefs and practices.”

1990s postmodernist enthusiasm for CMC technologies was informed in part by the view developed by Innis (1951), Eisenstein (1983), McLuhan (1965), and Ong (1988), of communication as a technology centrally definitive of culture.¹ According to this view, traditional (specifically *modern*) religions and religious institutions were closely wedded to the communication technologies of *print* and *literacy*, in contrast with what Ong described as the secondary *orality* of cyberspace (Ong, 1988). It was further argued that a radical migration from the real to the virtual should be accompanied by a revolutionary overturning of traditional (*modern*) religious institutions.

As Stephen Jacobs and others make clear in this issue, however, diverse religious traditions (in Jacobs’ study, Christianity and Hinduism) are quite capable of adapting to and adopting CMC technologies to their own requirements and values. Helland makes this point at the outset and invokes the work of MacKenzie and Wajcman (1985) on the “social shaping of technology.” The point is reiterated by Heidi Campbell, who draws on the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) approach developed initially by Bijker and Law (1992). Out of this approach Campbell documents what she calls “the spiritual shaping of technology” by diverse religious groups—namely, the transformation of CMC technologies by the values, practices, and demands of specific religious traditions rather than (as the Innis-Ong view would have it) the transformation of religion by these technologies.

This same point is made in the context of Singapore, which has a striking diversity of religious traditions (Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Chinese traditions). For example, Pauline Cheong and Randy Kluver document that, *contra* the “secularization thesis”—the assumption that the institutions and practices of modernity and Enlightenment rationalism (first and foremost, natural science and its application in modern technologies) would gradually marginalize and eliminate traditional religions—the multiple religious traditions of Singapore, one of the most technologically advanced and prosperous of modern states, largely embrace the Internet. Moreover, as Helland documents, there is a distinctive fit between *diaspora* religious communities (e.g., Judaism and Hinduism) and CMC technologies, as these technologies allow believers dispersed around the world to form online communities that sustain their connection to a distant homeland and a tradition that may be marginalized (or even illegal) in their local geographical setting. In short, contrary to 1990s prophecies of its imminent demise through the emergence of CMC (and related) technologies,

religion appears to be here to stay. It is not only surviving but thriving in our “post-post-modern” world, both offline and in the venues provided by CMC.

This is not to say, however, that every religious tradition has come to embrace the Internet and CMC with equal and unequivocal enthusiasm. While many religious traditions, as documented here, successfully migrate into cyberspace in various forms, these findings do not unequivocally refute postmodern predictions of the radical transformation of religion via the Internet and CMC. If nothing else, it is simply too early to tell with clarity or certainty how the still nascent interactions between traditional religions and new technologies will evolve, especially as the technologies themselves continue to develop and diffuse around the globe.

Moreover, several of the contributors make clear that in important instances, specific characteristics of believers and traditions foster *resistance* to migration online. As a first example, Mitsuharu Watanabe finds that the more *dogmatic* participants in a BBS designed to foster dialogue among believers from diverse traditions post more frequently and eventually drive other participants to other venues. By contrast, the more *tolerant* and open participants, once driven away from the BBS, find themselves happy to express and explore views on their own weblogs. In a similar vein, Rev. Kenshin Fukamizu highlights Japanese Buddhist traditions that are more rigidly hierarchical than others and thereby more inclined to *resist* migration to online environments.

Anglican Christians who likewise endorse a more static institutional hierarchy demonstrate a similar resistance (Campbell, this issue). Campbell further documents greater resistance to online migration in Ultra-Orthodox Judaism and at least some representatives of Islam—in the latter case, in part because of a comparatively greater emphasis on the role of the *Qur'an* as a sacred *text*. As in other Abrahamic traditions—perhaps most notably, Roman Catholicism—this greater emphasis on *text* has been observed to correlate with more static, “one-way” website construction (e.g., following the “one-to-many” broadcast model of other mass media), in contrast with more interactive website construction associated with those traditions that place greater emphasis on evangelism and experiential engagement, such as Christian Evangelicals (cf. Helland, this issue).

Fukamizu points out that the Jodo Shin sect of Buddhism in Japan likewise simply re-creates a one-way preaching style online, an example of religion online that reinforces more than revolutionizes religion—or, in Jacobs' terms, of religion online that is homologous with religion offline. Finally, some traditions see a greater tension between the sacred and the profane—with the Internet and CMC squarely allied with the latter—so that online environments are seen as ill-suited to the most important expressions of their belief, including ritual and prayer. Thus, Cheong and Kluver note resistance to posting the details of tantric practices online: This sort of information, its practitioners insist, can only be appropriately conveyed within a mature and carefully cultivated teacher-student relationship. Similarly, Fukamizu documents that some adherents of Japanese *Jodo Shin* Buddhism insist that its sublimity cannot be successfully conveyed through online environments. This point is

reiterated by Shinto informants, as documented by Akira Kawabata and Takanori Tamura, as well as Kurosaki (2005; see also Ess, forthcoming).

Moreover, factors *independent* of specific aspects and beliefs of religious traditions also come into play. For example, we might expect a tension between a more critical attitude held towards religious claims by those more likely to use the Internet and less critical attitudes held by many believers towards the defining claims of their tradition. That is, there may be a correlation between Internet use and critical attitudes in general, with “religion” as but one target of Internet users’ critical approach (Fukamizu, this issue). Similarly, both the Japanese contributors and Cheong and Kluver point out that in the few cases where the Internet is not taken up enthusiastically by religious communities, this may be in part an artifact of *demographics* rather than presumed hostility between “religion” and technology. That is, both in Japan and Singapore, believers tend to be older and hence less likely to take up CMC technologies, while younger, more Internet-savvy persons are less likely to affiliate themselves with traditional religions.

Also highlighted in the studies in this issue are important characteristics and features of religious traditions that make them better suited—albeit in varying degrees—to migration online. Helland’s example of diaspora communities underscores a point that has long been documented by others (e.g., O’Leary & Brasher, 1996), namely that people who find themselves in a religious minority are often the first to embrace CMC as offering communicative opportunity otherwise lacking in their offline communities. Kawabata and Tamura likewise suggest here that to be religious in a strong way in Japan is to occupy a minority position; hence, the anonymity of the Internet may foster online religion in Japan. As another important feature, Jacobs points out that Hinduism has a long tradition of worship at home, including the *puja* rituals that constitute much of the ritual practice he documents in a Hindu Virtual Temple. The shift from a *puja* ritual already carried out in the home to one taking place through an Internet-connected PC in the home may thus be an easier step than for Western Christians who tend to affiliate the sacred with the sanctuary as separate from the home. Finally, especially in the U.S., Evangelicals have always been at the forefront of adopting and adapting to new technologies to spread their message—in part, perhaps, because their initial self-perception was one of a marginalized minority—including being among the first to utilize the then-new technologies of movies, radio, and TV (Lindvall, 2004).

In sum, the majority of the world’s religious traditions, both Eastern and Western, are adapting to and adopting the Internet and CMC with at least modest, and sometimes striking, success. The following article summaries highlight these elements in greater detail and illustrate several important connections between individual articles.

Article Summaries

The collection begins with **Christopher Helland**’s “Diaspora on the Electronic Frontier: Developing Virtual Connections with Sacred Homelands.” Helland offers

a comprehensive introduction to the emergence of religion in multiple ways online. He also provides comparative insight as he examines the online manifestations of diverse religious traditions such as Judaism and Hinduism.

Helland's particular focus is on the emergence of religion and spirituality in the earliest venues of CMC, beginning with Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) and then USENET. The first group devoted specifically to the discussion of religion—net.religion—was founded on February 6, 1983. Helland notes that although discussions in this first group tended to be more polemical than religious, this led to the establishment of the first group devoted to providing a safe haven for followers of a particular tradition, the group net.religion.jewish (another instance of a minority tradition emerging as an early adopter of the new technology). Helland sees in this development the characteristic emergence of *diaspora* religious communities online. Thus, for example, when USENET was reorganized in the early 1990s to allow for more groups, one of the first to emerge was a diaspora community of immigrant Hindu workers in Islamic countries that expressly forbid any non-Islamic religious exercise. Their USENET group helped them to exercise and maintain their religious activities and beliefs. More broadly, by 1990, nearly 300 religious groups had established themselves on USENET.

Helland's history then documents the emergence of what he terms *religion-online*—primarily in the example of the Vatican's impressive but non-interactive website—in contrast with the emergence of *online-religion*. *Religion-online* arose as people and institutions learned to exploit the interactive elements of the Internet and the Web (including chat rooms, hyperlinks, multimedia, etc.) in order to engage actively with one another in dialogue and—as is documented especially by Heidi Campbell and Stephen Jacobs in this issue—create new spaces and experiences of spirituality. In particular, Helland shows how *diaspora* communities (Jewish, Hindu, Muslim) have successfully used the Web to develop virtual pilgrimages, virtual visits to important temples and religious sites, and ways of participating in important rituals online.

While Helland acknowledges limitations to how far embodied beings (my term) may participate in such sacred events, he goes on to detail various ways in which different groups have sought to maximize the sense of physical participation, e.g., by placing written prayers, delivered via email, in the Western Wall of the Second Temple. The even more elaborate procedures surrounding virtual participation in a Hindu *pūja*, Helland argues, alongside the many thousands of people who pay companies to provide these services, suggests that such virtual participation, while not identical to real-world, embodied participation, nonetheless meets important spiritual needs. In particular, because Hinduism has a tradition of home worship, Helland speculates that the computer at home more easily supplements real-world/embodied worship and participation.

Kenshin Fukamizu, a prominent Japanese researcher as well as an ordained priest in the *Jodo Shin* (Pure Land) denomination of Buddhism, provides a comparable overview of religion and the Internet in Japan in his "Internet Use Among Religious Followers: Religious Postmodernism in Japanese Buddhism." Fukamizu's

research—a mix of both quantitative and qualitative approaches—sheds light on how far the interaction between CMC and religion may change and transform the latter. On the one hand, in accord with Helland's and others' findings in this collection, Fukamizu finds that many temple websites in Japan follow Helland's model of *religion-online*: As traditional religions and institutions seek to manifest themselves online, they do so in largely non-interactive, one-to-many communication. In contrast, Fukamizu documents a number of sites—especially those offering the possibility of dialogical interaction—that exemplify Helland's model of *online-religion*. Such sites are relatively few, however, and Fukamizu speculates that because it is only interactive sites that really meet religious needs, their small numbers are a contributing reason why religious use of the Internet in Japan, especially as compared with the United States, is quite low.

Moreover, Fukamizu's own quantitative study of priests and lay participants of *Jodo Shin* Buddhism (Japan's largest Buddhist denomination) uncovers an interesting *negative* correlation between Internet use and belief in the sublimity of *Jodo Shin* (meaning, specifically, conviction that belief in *Jodo Shin* improves society and is the only path to salvation). That is, greater Internet use correlates significantly with lower belief in sublimity. More broadly, Fukamizu's survey results suggest that increased Internet use correlates with what he calls a critical attitude or skepticism regarding religious claims. However, rather than seeing in this the potential demise of traditional religion through migration to the Internet (cf. the Innis-Ong thesis, as discussed especially by Jacobs in this issue), Fukamizu sees the possibility of a hybrid model of faith that conjoins postmodern emphasis on dialogical interactivity with traditional religious teachings and institutions that can help provide stability and "brand value" to such dialogues.

In their "Online-Religion in Japan: Websites and Religious Counseling from a Comparative Cross-Cultural Perspective," **Akira Kawabata** and **Takanori Tamura** provide additional quantitative understanding of religion online—first of all by way of a comparison between very low use of the Internet for religious purposes in Japan (2.5%) and very extensive use of the Internet in the U.S. for religious purposes (ca. 64%). Kawabata and Tamura show that this contrast reflects first of all important differences in the demographics between Japan and the U.S. While large numbers of U.S. citizens express at least some religious belief, in Japan, believers are much more likely to be older, and thereby less likely to make use of the Internet. In addition, Kawabata and Tamura illustrate very different attitudes towards and understandings of what counts as "religion" in Japan that would further explain low reporting of religious usage of the Internet in Japan. For example, many respondents who do *not* identify themselves as "religious" nonetheless engage in what would otherwise be considered "religious" activities, such as annual family visits to family graves.

Kawabata and Tamura agree with Fukamizu regarding the potential of the Internet to foster online-religion (explicitly making use of Helland's distinction), and examine a range of different Japanese sites to determine how far they succeed in exploiting this potential. In their survey, it is important to note that Shinto, as the

oldest and perhaps most traditional of Japanese religions, proves the exception to the general finding that most religious traditions have (more or less) comfortably migrated to the Internet in one form or another. In particular, *contra* the widespread adoption of rituals to online venues as documented by Helland and Jacobs in this issue, Kawabata and Tamura note that, with some exceptions, the prevailing view is that “[t]he superficial act of virtual shrine visits threatens to erode the dignity of this traditional shrine-oriented faith and to create misunderstandings.” They further note that especially among Japan’s New Religions, there is an emphasis on “experientialism”—i.e., an active, embodied (my term) engagement with the rituals and requirements of the religion that does not translate easily into contemporary venues enabled by CMC. On the other hand, they also document two interesting examples of online religious mediation and counseling—activities that fit nicely with text-based CMC. They further observe that the anonymity of the Internet may foster online religion in Japan, because to be religious in Japan is to be a member of a marginalized minority, in sharp contrast with the U.S.

Mitsuharu M. Watanabe closes out the introductory section and begins the transition to the second section of articles, which is devoted to more specific elements of religion and CMC. Watanabe lays the groundwork for a strongly comparative approach to religion and CMC—one that would compare and contrast these in the Japanese and U.S. contexts—and begins to contribute to such an approach with a series of careful statistical analyses of differences between the psychological and spiritual orientations of users of a Bulletin Board System (BBS) and those of users of a weblog system, both of which are housed on the same website. Watanabe uses the term “mind gap” to describe the differences he uncovers, where “mind” is understood much more broadly than in the U.S. context, so as to include not simply *cognitive* elements (e.g., ideas, claims, beliefs) but also *affective* and *psychological* elements (e.g., felt attitudes towards self-change, relationships to others, etc.). He documents a striking pattern of sudden migration from the interactive and dialogical BBS to the monological “self-broadcasting” of the weblog system as users encounter difficulties in their efforts to undertake dialogues online regarding religion (defined as including attachment to a recognized religious tradition and/or institution) and spirituality (understood as an interest in matters of faith and spirit, but not as attached to a specific religious tradition, creed, dogma, etc.). Watanabe discerns a correlation between those who post most frequently to the BBS and a tendency toward relative intolerance for different views (demonstrated by a proclivity towards strong self-assertion and self-righteousness), in contrast with the greater tolerance of those who are more active on weblogs.

Watanabe is interested in understanding these “mind gaps” as causes of communication failures online, not only for their own sake, but with the intention of developing more sophisticated approaches to, and systems to support, online dialogues that, by overcoming these mind gaps, may prove to be more fruitful venues for online discussion of religion and spirituality. To this end, Watanabe and his colleagues have developed a weblog system that subsumes BBS-like functions,

including the ability to register comments and a “track-back” function that helps readers follow discussion threads. They have found that this new system indeed fosters more positive communication online regarding spirituality. Future developments of this system hope to incorporate a form of Habermasian discourse ethics, among other elements thought to contribute to more egalitarian and democratic forms of communication (see Becker & Wehner, 2001), although these developments require further research.

Heidi Campbell begins her article “Who’s Got the Power? Questions of Religious Authority in Relation to the Internet” with an overview of the extensive literature and research on religion online (based in part on her landmark 2006 study) as regards the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This overview helps set the larger context and framework for subsequent chapters by Abdulla Rasha; Noor Hazarina Hasim, Jamie Murphy, and Nazlida Muhamad Hashim; Stephen Jacobs; and Pauline Cheong and Randy Kluver.

For her part, Campbell takes up a specific focus on *authority* as understood and transformed through the Internet in the three Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). As Campbell points out, while there has been considerable research on the intersections between religion and online environments—attention to the specific element of *authority* and how diverse conceptions and understandings may be transformed in the migration onto online venues has been lacking. Indeed, her first order of business is to define what “authority” might mean in more careful ways than has been previously done. In particular, she offers an understanding of how authority appears and functions in multiple ways—namely, in terms of religious *hierarchy, structure, ideology, and text*—as well as in ways that vary from one tradition to another.

Overlapping discussions of authority in previous research share the common question, “how may online religious rituals and patterns of life affirm or challenge traditional authorities (e.g., institutions, structures, and roles)?” Campbell notes that this question is a specific dimension of the larger interest in CMC research on online *community*, and the overarching interest in determining how far the emergence of virtual community might threaten and/or enhance traditional, geographically-based communities. Campbell provides additional valuable background here by way of a review of the most relevant and significant studies on the Internet vis-à-vis traditional religious communities and their affiliated practices, and the implications of these studies for religious authority. The prevailing evidence shows that online engagement, contrary to early hopes (for revolution) and fears (of radical change), largely supplements and enhances traditional religious communities and authority rather than directly challenging or overturning them.

In Campbell’s own qualitative study of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic communities in relation to authority, ‘authority’ is refined to include four specific dimensions: hierarchy, structure, ideology, and text. Her interviews highlight specific ways in which online religious communication both affirms and challenges various modalities of authority. Thus, for example, the authority of religious institutional

structures for Anglicans, who believe them to be static rather than dynamic, resist rather than embrace online environments. Campbell's interviews bring to the foreground different stresses on authority in different religious communities. For example, the *text* of the Qur'an emerges as a primary authority for her Muslim informants, while the *community* emerges as a primary authority for the Jewish informants. These and other details that emerge from her interviews point to a comprehensive program for future research that would provide a more nuanced understanding of how diverse forms of authority are confirmed and/or transformed as different religious traditions migrate increasingly to online venues.

The next set of studies are more narrowly focused, beginning with **Rasha A. Abdulla's** "Islam, Jihad, and Terrorism in Post 9/11," a careful content analysis of postings to three Arabic-language discussion boards in the wake of 9/11. Abdulla points out that in the Middle Eastern context, the Internet is an especially important medium, not only because it provides venues for free expression, but because it thereby gives researchers insight into views and ideas that may not appear in governmentally-controlled media. Abdulla prefaces her study by reminding us that, contrary to Western tendencies to conflate Islam with Arabs and Arab countries, most Arabs (defined as a specific ethnic group) are Muslims, while the majority of Muslims (people who choose Islam as their religion) are from non-Arab countries. (Indeed, in this issue, Hashim, Murphy, and Hashim analyze Malaysia as an officially Islamic country, and Cheong and Kluver analyze Islam in Singapore—both multicultural Asian states.) In addition, Abdulla reviews the dismal record of anti-Arab and anti-Islamic stereotyping in Western popular media and journalism—stereotyping that reinforces U.S. ignorance of Islam, Arabs, and related cultures and traditions. Obviously, this situation did not improve following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, despite their more or less universal condemnation by Muslims and Islamic countries around the world, including Arabs and Arab countries. On the contrary, Abdulla documents how U.S. pundits and media fell back on stereotypes to justify retaliation. (In light of subsequent events, it is startling to see how pundits such as Ann Coulter called for—and soon got—forms of retaliation that violate international law and Christian Just War theory.)

Abdulla documents that a large percentage of posters (43.1% of analyzed postings) condemned the attacks. Importantly, those who found the attacks justified (30.2%) did so primarily on *political* rather than *religious* grounds. That is, in keeping with other research—and contrary to the tendency of Western media and current U.S. administration policy to couch the "War on Terror" in terms of a terrorism inspired by *religious* motivation—violence against the U.S., when seen to be justified, was justified in terms of *political* issues such as U.S. policies in the Middle East. Moreover, while there were a few postings that supported the attacks in the name of Islam, these postings were greatly outnumbered by those that either first insisted that Islam could only condemn such attacks on innocent people, no matter their religion, or postings directly criticizing those who attempted to use Islam as a support for the attacks.

Moreover, Abdulla documents a strong example of a *positive* use of the Internet as a vehicle with potential for contributing to greater interfaith understanding and tolerance. Especially as the Internet makes possible comparatively free expression for Arabs in environments otherwise marked by government-controlled media, it thereby opens up the possibility of expressing and communicating to the larger world views and beliefs of those “on the ground” in Arabic countries that might not otherwise be heard. In this way, as Abdulla makes clear, people in the West are privileged to see how Arabs and others in the Middle East understand Islam to be a religion emphasizing compassion, tolerance, and peace, which, like its sister traditions of Judaism and Christianity, unequivocally condemns the murder of innocents, especially in the name of “religion.”

Of course, the Internet and World Wide Web have not escaped the notice of advertisers. The study by **Noor Hazarina Hashim, Jamie Murphy, and Nazlida Muhamad Hashim** of how Malaysian “destination marketing organizations” (DMOs) take up Islam (the official religion of Malaysia) and Muslim iconography in their advertising is of interest both because it provides comparative perspectives on marketing and because it provides Western readers with insight and understanding concerning how peoples and nations in the Islamic world take up important potentials of CMC. Religious tourism, as Hashim, Murphy, and Hashim point out, is an ancient phenomenon, one dating back to the Assyrians and Babylonians. It is especially affiliated with Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam; in the last case, perhaps most notable is the *Haji* (or pilgrimage to Mecca) urged upon every Muslim at least once in a lifetime, if he or she can afford to make it.

In their survey of how different Islamic countries respond to the potential market of one billion Muslims, Hashim et al. remind us of a larger point: Just as with other major traditions such as Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, etc., “Islam” and “Muslim,” contrary to Western stereotypes, refer less to a monolithic identity and more to shared religious traditions shaping and shaped by diverse national and cultural traditions. In particular, while all Muslims (by definition) draw from the same scripture, law (*Shariah*), and authoritative interpretations of these, different countries and traditions interpret Islamic Law in distinctive ways. Thus Malaysia, for example, is less strict in certain ways (e.g., regarding dress and alcohol) than Saudi Arabia. This is in part because, although Malaysia’s official religion is Islam, reflecting the religious tradition of approximately 60% of its population, Malaysia recognizes and protects the religious freedom of its Buddhist, Christian, Hindus, and Confucian citizens as well. Obviously, these differences must be taken into account when attempting to assess “Islamic” responses to, and uses of, CMC technologies. Moreover, these variations play a direct role in shaping how a country such as Malaysia might cater to and attract both Muslim and non-Muslim tourists.

Not surprisingly, the Internet and the World Wide Web dramatically change how DMOs can market a particular country to potential tourists. In particular, because some provinces in Malaysia hold to a stricter enforcement of *Shariah* than others, Hashim et al. hypothesize that stronger Islamic imagery will be found on the websites

of DMOs for these provinces. As well, they hypothesize that such imagery is more likely to be found during *Hari Raya Aidilfitri* (the Malaysian term for the Arabic festival *Eid-ul-Fitr*, or simply *Eid*—the celebration marking the end of daylight fasting during the month of Ramadan). Using interviews and website content analysis, Hashim et al. find that Islamic imagery appears *less* often than hypothesized. This finding may reflect Malaysia's strongly multicultural orientation, one that emphasizes religious harmony in society. Researchers interested in this domain may want to look closely at how Hashim et al. developed their analytical methodology—especially their content analysis—as a model for how to conduct similar analyses for other religious traditions.

In keeping with the preponderance of examples gathered in this collection, from a broader perspective, the findings of Hashim et al. suggest that the migration of religion to the online environment is by and large *not* a revolutionary event. On the contrary, religion online appears largely to imitate religion offline—a point that the next author makes in terms of cyberrituals.

Stephen Jacobs' "Virtually Sacred: The Performance of Asynchronous Cyber Rituals in Online Spaces" takes up the particular theme of 1990s postmodernist enthusiasm for CMC and the presumably revolutionary transformation of traditional religion via the migration into what Walter Ong characterized as "the secondary orality of cyberspace" (1988, pp. 135-138). Jacobs critically evaluates this claim through a careful analysis of ritual and the *sacred* spaces of ritual—both offline and online—in two diverse traditions, Christianity and Hinduism.

Jacobs begins with an extensive discussion of fundamental conceptions of sacred space, including its architectural dimensions, followed by a review of relevant literature on conceptions of space, cyberspace, and how far we can justifiably understand how sacred space might be constructed within cyberspace. Jacobs notes that "it is possible to set apart, in the Durkheimian sense, special places within cyberspace in which it is possible to facilitate cyber ritual-architectural events that bring together (disembodied) people and (virtual) building in a hermeneutical conversation/game"—a possibility that he finds documented in Campbell's (2004) earlier work on sacramental space.

Jacobs provides an equally detailed account of ritual and its meaning and role in religion generally when he turns to analysis of two sacred spaces online—a Hindu Virtual Temple and a Christian Virtual Church. Despite important differences between offline and online ritual in both traditions, Jacobs points out that online ritual and ritual spaces are constructed in the first instance in ways that primarily imitate their offline originals. He then provides a phenomenological account of how one participates ritually in such sites, along with a description of specific rituals and ritual places online and comments from both webmasters and ritual participants. Contra the Innis-Ong thesis, especially as expanded and supported by O'Leary (2005) and Brasher (2004), which celebrates how the migration of religion onto online venues will largely overturn traditional religion, specifically since traditional religion is tightly connected with literacy and print, Jacobs finds that both the Virtual

Temple and the Virtual Church are “highly conventional in their design.” Indeed, they must be, he argues, if they are successfully to encode meaning in the ways required and expected by their participants.

The collection concludes with research from Singapore, which is one of the most wired societies in the world (with a 74% Internet penetration rate), as well as one of the most religiously diverse (incorporating followers of Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Chinese traditions). Hence, the current state of religion and the Internet in Singapore may serve as both a microcosm of contemporary global realities and a harbinger of their future. **Pauline Cheong** and **Randy Kluver**’s “Technological Modernization, the Internet, and Religion in Singapore” takes as its starting point Campbell’s (2005) account of the “spiritual shaping of technology”—i.e., the ways in which religious traditions manage to take up new technologies to ensure acceptability of these technologies within the extant frameworks of these traditions (in contrast with allowing technologies to modify or reshape religious traditions, beliefs, practices, etc.). From this starting point, based in part on SCOT—the social construction of technology—approaches (see Heaton, 2001; MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1985), Cheong and Kluver address the specific question raised by the so-called *secularization thesis*. This holds that the rise of modernity, including modern natural science and Enlightenment notions of reason, will eventually eliminate traditional religion, except as private belief. The hostility presumed here between modern rationalism and religion, they go on to show, has undergirded a number of claims, including those characterizing the Internet as an embodiment of especially Western values (e.g., individualism, free expression, equality, and the importance of financial gain) and thus as a threat to traditional, including Confucian and Islamic, societies.

In their review of relevant literature, Cheong and Kluver highlight Campbell’s argument that some religious groups may be more successful than others at resisting whatever values and affordances may be embedded in CMC technologies: Correlatively, some religious groups learn to shape these technologies and uses in ways more coherent with their religious frameworks and value systems—rather than allow these frameworks and systems to be reshaped by the technologies—in part because religious frameworks are shaped precisely by an insistence on the distinction between the sacred and the profane. Cheong and Kluver’s review provides extensive evidence against the so-called “secularization thesis”—so much so, they note, that modern secularism is the anomaly that requires explanation at least as much as the tenacity of religious belief.

Cheong and Kluver then turn to their own set of rich interviews with religious leaders in Singapore in order to uncover prevailing attitudes toward and assumptions about the Internet, especially with regard to how far the leaders understand the Internet to be a threat to their authority (where religious leaders stand as one of four forms of authority, to recall Campbell, this issue). They found the expected concerns regarding content, such as pornography, that is deemed dangerous and corrupting. In addition, leaders from a wide range of traditions expressed concerns regarding

a perceived incompatibility between the Internet and the *embodied* practices of faith communities, including communal prayer and ritual (cf. Ess, 2001, 2004). The leaders also expressed fears regarding the possible misuse of information that requires a personal relationship between teacher and student for its appropriate transmission (e.g., tantric practices in Hinduism). In many other ways, however, Cheong and Kluver find not only a tolerance, but indeed an embrace of the Internet and the World Wide Web as technologies useful to religion and religious communities (e.g., in Helland's term, religion-online), if only in the function of providing information to people.

Provisional Postscript

Overall, it appears that contrary to 1990s (and earlier, Enlightenment) enthusiasms for the quick eradication of traditional religious beliefs, practices, institutions, etc., most contemporary religious traditions are migrating online at least modestly—in Helland's phrase, in the form of religion-online, e.g., to use the Web as advertising space and text repositories—if not enthusiastically, in the form of online-religion, including religious counseling and ritual practice. The contributors to this collection have highlighted important features of religious traditions that either hinder their migration online (e.g., greater emphasis on static, hierarchical institutional structures, emphasis on the sacredness or uniqueness of religious information and practices vs. the profane or secular environment of the Internet, etc.) or foster this migration (e.g., greater decentralization, greater emphasis on the *community* as authority, etc.). At the same time, they have made clear that “religion”—contrary to Western modernist views—is hardly a monolithic phenomenon, one somehow hermetically sealed off from its local environment and its attendant cultural, political, and social dimensions. Rather, how Islam, for example, manifests itself online in such multicultural states as Malaysia and Singapore is markedly different from its manifestations in other Islamic countries. Demographics also play a critical role, as in the U.S., where religious belief appears to span the generations, versus Japan and Singapore, where believers tend to be older and less Internet-savvy than younger generations, who are more Internet-savvy and more secular.

The composite picture that begins to emerge here points toward a more comprehensive understanding of how the world's religions will respond to the Internet and the World Wide Web. At the same time, this composite is obviously incomplete, basic, and very preliminary. Hence, we hope that this special theme section will foster further research that will continue to expand knowledge of the complex interactions between religion and CMC—research that can profitably draw, we believe, from the insights and progress made by the contributions in this collection.

Indeed, as religion continues to foster and expand its role in the lives of the vast majority of the world's population, as that population increasingly accesses and makes use of CMC technologies (over one billion at the time of this writing, or approximately one-sixth of the world's population), and as the majority of the

world's religious traditions continue their migration online, religion on the Internet should become an increasingly important dimension of CMC research. We hope that this special issue will generate insights, foundations and, most of all, enthusiasm for a research field that is crucial, growing, and very much in its beginning stages.

Acknowledgments

“Was lange währt, wird gut [what brews a long time becomes good]!”

I have kept this German proverb in mind over the course of developing this special issue: For a number of very good reasons, it has proven to be an unusually complex and difficult challenge. In particular, good reviewers are always hard to find—a fact that proved to be doubly true in our case. To begin with, while religion online is a vital and growing field of Internet research, the researchers active in these domains are still relatively few in number. Second, those with competencies in the cross-cultural approaches and/or expertise in multiple religious traditions needed for critical evaluation of our contributors' work are rare indeed. Hence, the authors gathered here and I are doubly grateful to the following for their great help in making what started out as strong contributions even better: Eileen Barker (London School of Economics, UK); Jim Beckford (University of Warwick, UK); Ward Blanton (University of Glasgow); Ewa Callahan (St. Joseph College, USA); Mia Consalvo (Ohio University, USA); Lorne L. Dawson (University of Waterloo, Canada); Stephen G. Covell (Western Michigan University, USA); Alex Halavais (Quinnipiac University, USA); Lorna Heaton (Université de Montréal, Canada); Mark Johns (Luther College, USA); John Lannon (University of Limerick, Ireland); Göran Larsson (Linköping Universitet, Sweden); David Loyd (Xavier University, Ohio, USA); Mia Lövhelm (Uppsala Universitet, Sweden); Nakada Makoto (University of Tsukuba, Japan); Ulrika Mårtensson (Norwegian University of Science and Technology); Ian Reader (Lancaster University, UK); and Miguel Sicart (IT-University, Denmark).

Note

- 1 See Chesebro and Bertelson (1996) for a comprehensive overview and analysis of what we refer to here as the Innis-Ong thesis—perhaps the single most influential theory in communication studies in the latter half of the 20th century. However, this approach has come under criticism on several points, beginning with its tendency toward a *technological determinism* that is no longer seen to hold up in the face of empirical evidence (see Ess, 2004).

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