

Online Religion and Finding Faith on the Web: An Examination of Beliefnet.org

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ASK you to consider these two scenarios: In the first, a small Hindu temple sits at the end of a narrow, winding road in the mountains of southwest India. The people outside gaze at the elaborate carvings in the white stone temple, waiting patiently for hours to work their way to the front of the line and enter into the temple's heart. Inside, an image of Kali rests in the center, surrounded by devotees stretched out in prayer. The place is alive with sounds, smells, tastes, and sights that absorb the visitors and monks in a sacred, awe-inspiring experience with transcendent otherness.

Now, in the second scenario, imagine visiting the same Hindu temple online via a computer terminal. Instead of entering an edifice that appeals to all of the senses, the Web page simply provides the visitor with an image, perhaps the smiling image of a Shiva. Hyperlinked text brings the user through a menu of worship experiences, including utterances of Vedic praise and a QuickTime movie of mystical, rapidly alternating images with accompanying sounds to which the user can meditate.

Brenda Brasher, in her recent book *Give Me That Online Religion* (2001), opens her discussion with these examples to illustrate how, in the transition from temple to screen, a radical alteration of the sense stimulation has taken place, consequently altering the religious experience itself. My own experiences with religion reflect the same kinds of incongruities described in Brasher's examples, prompting me to look further into this phenomenon of religion on the Internet.

It seems that God has arrived on the Internet, and with a rather imposing presence that is hard to overlook. Bob Jacobson (1999) found that the Internet has become a major purveyor of spiritual expression at a time when spiritual hunger is growing in the West. In a study of religion and the Internet conducted by sociologist Ken Bedell of the United Methodist Church (Martin, 1999), nearly 80% of the respondents said the medium played a role in their spiritual lives, with some turning to it up to three times a week. Of the 600 people surveyed, 53% said they solicit prayers through e-mail. The Pew Internet and American Life Project (Larsen, 2000) discovered that more people use the Internet for religious purposes than for many secular reasons. More than two million Americans search the Internet for religious or spiritual material, and religious institutions are increasingly integrating the Internet into their everyday practices. Why are millions of electronic pages dedicated to sharing the ineffable, that which can't be expressed in words? Is cyberspace becoming a new—or *the* new—sacred space?

As it expands, the world of virtual worship is sparking controversy that cuts to the heart of what "religion" means. Several theological—as well as cultural and social—questions arise in the wake of this modification of religious sensibilities. Within this context, I find the possibility and

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the need to examine the phenomena of the Internet and World Wide Web in terms of their specific uses and opportunities as discovered by various religious groups.

This paper represents a step towards a theory of the Internet and religion, asking “What implications does the Internet hold for our spiritual identities, our practices of worship, and our sense of religious community?” The Internet is a medium that can transcend both spatial and temporal boundaries. It allows us to enter into a whole new set of relationships—relationships that can be close or distant, yet inherently all (in principle) interactive. Cyberspace widens the social foundation of religious life as it diminishes the relevance of location for religious identities. My paper begins to address these concerns by considering a popular Web site, Beliefnet.org. This paper can help us to begin to examine the larger issue of Internet and religion.

CULTURAL critics such as Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman offer a theoretical framework within which to examine the Internet’s potential impact on the religious experience. Their media-ecological perspective is based in the idea that every media development alters the availability of traditional private and public places. In other words, major technological innovations don’t just add something new to the environment, but change the whole environment ecologically and structurally (Postman, 1985). Within this framework, I seek the ways in which networked computing technologies—or, more specifically, the Internet—alter the religious environment as we have otherwise come to define it.

Which, of course, raises the question, what is this religious environment? Religion and spirituality on the Internet are emerging as global phenomena, while the Internet itself is emerging as a medium that transcends spatial and temporal boundaries. Implicit in the idea of religion on the Internet is the notion of access—that is, we can assume, for the sake of the current study, that I am referring to developed, modern nations, and we must therefore flesh out a definition that not only respects the global nature of the phenomenon in question, but also takes into account religion’s relationship with the modern world.

Brenda Brasher (2001) contends that no one religious tradition has ever completely articulated humanity’s encounter with and understanding of the transcendent. Religion thus exists in the plural, and I address it in a pluralistic, inclusive sense. This includes not only the traditional and “new” religious movements, but the also the contemporary network of practices and symbols that are not organized movements but manage to find presence in other ways. The historically received categories are being replaced by new claims of new faiths, stretching former definitions of religion to unsurvivable limits. As the boundaries become more shapeless, the concept of *belief* rather than of *belonging* comes to the fore (Clark & Hoover, 1997). Robert Orsi (1997) adds that something called “religion” cannot be neatly separated from other practices of everyday life, from the ways that human beings work the land to the ways in which they dispose of their corpses; nor can religion be separated from the material circumstances in which specific instances of religious imagination and behavior arise, and to which participants respond. Brasher asserts that religion comes into being as an ongoing relationship with the realities of everyday life—that is, it is an integral part of “lived experience,” or the places where humans make something of the worlds into which they have found themselves thrown. Meanings are made, known, and verified through these quotidian actions on the world.

This view of religion is consistent with its manifestation in the modern world, where reality is fragmented and often lacks the shared aspects that make the common universe of meaning and interpretation possible (Martin-Barbero, 1997). But it is no longer practicable for religion to exercise its integrating functions primarily through the means of ecclesiastical power and discipline or doctrinal authority, for religion in the modern world knows little of communal support, existing largely independent of institutionalized religious forms. According to religion scholar Peter Berger (1982), the hunger for religious certainty becomes merged with more mundane desires for restored community in which the differentiations and alienations of modern society will be overcome. For all its power, then, modernity has left a sense of emptiness; resisting the idea of living without some form of enchantment and mythic vision, people continue to seek ways to re-enchant the world, to bring back some of its magic and mystery (Martin-Barbero, 1997). Therefore, religion is far from fading from the public scene; indeed, it continues to play an important role in trends around the globe (Berger, 1982; Hoover, 1998). Churches and synagogues, in particular, are important in creating networks serving vital spiritual and fellowship needs of a community. Faith organizations are also emblematic of other organizations serving the social needs of the people (Larsen, 2000).

Defining cyberspace can be equally complex. Several scholars prove useful here. For Brasher (2000), cyberspace is at once monolithic and diverse. The monolithic aspects of cyberspace derive from its technologies and protocols—the intermesh of computer hardware and software, telephone or cable lines, and the human imagination. At the same time, it has material diversity from the variety of hardware and software used to access it; it has psychological diversity from the variety of human users who enter it.

Lance Strate (1999) emphasizes the significance of the multiplicity of meanings, uses, and varieties of cyberspace when seeking a definition. He contends that when considered as a collective concept, cyberspace can be defined as diverse experiences of space associated with computing and relation technologies. Within the confines of this definition, then, it is possible to discriminate between cybermedia versions of sacred and profane space. Strate points out that cyberspace is frequently taken for granted as a profane space, but it is indeed a sacred space as well, as can be noted not only in specific sites, but in the non-physical—and therefore potentially spiritual—properties of cyberspace when taken as a whole.

Sherry Turkle (Ramo, 1996) describes the Internet as something larger than ourselves, an entity so much greater than the sum of the parts as to inspire awe and wonder—in other words, a new metaphor for God. She writes: “God created a set of conditions from which life would emerge. Like it or not, the Internet is one of the most dramatic examples of something that is self-organized. That’s the point. God is the distributed, decentralized system.” Similarly, Jennifer Cobb, in her book *Cybergrace* (1998), argues that through the medium of computation, our spiritual experiences can be extended in profound ways. Her discussion is informed by the theory of emergence, developed by Jesuit paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin some 50 years ago. From Chardin’s theories, Cobb asserts that as technical systems become more complex, something elegant, inspired, and absolutely unpredictable simply and suddenly “emerges.” What many observers see emerging is the “hand of God.” James Langteaux (2000) has even gone so far as to use cyberspace terminology in his own search for God, insisting that “We need to log onto his page and become interactive with Him.”

TECHNOLOGY plays a distinctive role in our understanding of ourselves and our common histories. Technology was a thoroughly cultural phenomenon from the outset, acting as the expressions, creations of outlooks, and aspirations we pretend it merely demonstrates (Carey, 1988). Technological advances in the industrial and modern periods of history have changed not only cultural “equipment,” but also their social dynamics and cultural associations; technological innovations, social relationships, and cultural identities are intimately bound together (Lull, 1988). Communication, according to Stanley Fish (1980), is the symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed. Further, to study communications is to examine the actual social process wherein significant symbolic forms are created, apprehended, and used. The common denominator linking the study of interactions with the study of media is the structure of the social situations in which these interactions take place. Meyrowitz (1985) and Carey (1988) both contend that media of communication are therefore not merely instruments of will and purpose, but definite forms of life. The media are not simply channels for conveying information between two or more environments, but rather they are environments in and of themselves. In this context, religions themselves can be viewed as systems of communication, designed to facilitate and control the exchange of information between the mundane world and the realm of the sacred.

As forms of life, computers don’t just do things for us, but also to us, including affecting our ways of thinking about ourselves and other people (Turkle, 1995). The emergence of the culture of simulations prompted by computer networks is affecting our understanding of our minds and bodies as people embrace the notion that computers may extend an individual’s presence through space and time. Turkle (1995) explains that the computer is only a tool at one level, for at another it also offers both new models of the mind and a new medium on which to project our ideas and fantasies. The intense relationships that people maintain with computers are changing the way they think and feel. If technology is indeed having such an impact, then it follows that it has a significant role in the creation of new social and cultural sensibilities.

For example, technology is affecting us not primarily through content, but by changing the “situational geography” of social life (Meyrowitz, 1985). Electronic media bring many different types of people to the same “place,” blurring many formerly distinct social roles, changing the significance of time, space, and physical barriers as communication barriers. Within this context, scholars such as Turkle (1995) have found that electronic media are eroding the boundaries between the real and the virtual, the animate and the inanimate, and the unitary and multiple selves.

THE growth of the Internet and the World Wide Web is one example of how electronic media provide new opportunities for communication. According to Ananda Mitra (1997), the Internet is playing a role in the production of virtually connected communities of people who are producing cyber-identities for themselves as well as for their faith through a variety of discourses on the Internet. Bob Jacobson (1999) observes that on the Internet, religious expression has become just as varied as in the material world. It is generally considered *gauche* to question religious attitudes in American public life, but Jacobson notes that nothing is sacrosanct on the Internet, as there is nothing to separate the faithful. Religious persuasion seems no barrier

to Internet literacy. Sites include the plain and personal as well as the highly elaborate, although it seems that e-commerce has not yet replaced the real-world collection plate.

The Pew Internet & American Life Project (Larsen, 2000) contends that part of the Internet's appeal is its "always on" presence. Additionally, the Internet provides information for those who would prefer avoiding direct contact, at least initially, with the faith group; the links enlarge the available material; and e-mail in particular provides opportunities for outreach and mission activities. The faith communities studied by Pew Internet & American Life Project (Larsen, 2000) maintained both physical and cyber-presences. The Internet is being used to strengthen the faith, spiritual growth, and the faith of the members; to evangelize and perform missions in communities around the world; and to perform a variety of pious and practical everyday activities. The study found that 83% of its respondents felt the Web sites helped congregational life "some" or a "great deal," while 81% agreed that e-mail, at some level, helped improve the spiritual life of the congregation. E-mail serves as a binding element, flowing in all directions, communicating fellowship and faith activities, and reaching out to other faith communities.

The activity on these congregations' Web sites ranged from the basic, standard activities to a broad range of other activities, such as e-cards, special missions, and Bible trivia quizzes, as well as intimate faith and service activities. Congregations also reported much interest in adding new features to make the sites more dynamic and serve more purposes. In the meantime, one-way communication features were being used more than interactivity. A small number of the sites in this study noted that they exist to serve diverse populations who are more readily reachable on the Web. Most sites, however, served principally local needs, encouraging people to attend, providing faith texts, and linking to denominational or faith-related sites. Additionally, the Internet has served as a source of information for clergy; approximately one-fifth of Internet users have gone online to get religious and spiritual information.

Across the Internet, chat rooms and bulletin boards are providing new ways for seekers to understand old religion, and believers are re-examining ideas of faith, religion, and spirituality. As a result, "Every single religious group is having to reassess how to be who they are in the new electronic culture," states Francis Forde Plude, a professor of communications at Cleveland's Notre Dame College of Ohio ("Wired Religion," 1997). Churches, denominations, and sects are recognizing that to reach new converts and stay connected with current constituencies in this changing world, they must go online, too, or else take the chance of putting their futures at risk. In the face of increasing competition, the Web provides an opportunity to touch an unprecedented number of souls. Ministers post their sermons and provide counseling over the Internet, refining and personalizing their pastoral efforts to a degree never before imagined. With the hope that participants will feel more connected to their faith, sites also include features that help them get in the habit of regular worship. Prayer sites are especially popular because for most people, prayer is unscheduled and solitary anyway (Martin, 1999).

BELIEFNET.ORG, a popular and expansive religious Web site, touts itself as the "Source for Spirituality, Religion, and Morality," claiming at the top of its home page that "We all believe in something." From the very outset, this Web site implies an agreement with the place and manifestation of religion in America that I describe above. Membership at Beliefnet.org entitles the user to access tools for building a Web site for the respective house of worship;

obtain a free e-mail address; shop for spiritual and religious merchandise; post thoughts and ideas on the message boards; create a prayer circle for someone in need; join small group dialogues and seminars; and celebrate a birth, wedding, or life passage with interactive celebration and memorial pages. Subpages for the site include Community, Religions, Spirituality, Morality & Culture, Inspiration, Family & Life Events, Charity & Service, News, and Columnists. The Religion links fall under Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Interfaith, Islam, Judaism, and Other Religions (including Atheism, Taoism, and Zoroastrianism.) Jewish sites make up the largest group of links, with 22, and Hindu sites make up the second largest group of links, with 12. Overall, Christianity has the largest number of subcategories, accounting for such denominations as Catholic, Protestant, Mormon, and Eastern Orthodox.

In its statement of principles, Beliefnet describes itself as a multi-faith e-community designed to help the visitor meet his or her own spiritual needs “in an interesting, captivating and engaging way.” Beliefnet also claims to be independent; its Welcome page asserts, “We are not affiliated with a particular religion or spiritual movement. We are not out to convert you to a particular approach, but rather to help you find your own.” Indeed, it is a veritable marketplace of religion.

Accessible from anywhere there is a phone jack, the Web is a one-stop, high-speed bazaar where we can find the exact faith community of our choice. Postrel (1999) argues that on the Internet, no one has to be isolated, no matter how unusual he or she seems to be; people on the bell curve can find one another. Even the uncommon is as accessible as the common, making the possibility of finding a faith group that speaks to people’s spiritual needs quite viable indeed. Beliefnet not only offers information on a large variety of traditional and New Age faith groups, but even provides online quizzes for users to test their spirituality types. Proponents of religion on the Internet cite the relational, interactive aspects of the medium as evidence of its potential for relationship building. For virtual communities of believers, the Internet is a high-tech, high-touch way of saying, “You matter.” Many who participate in cyber-rituals say they feel part of an authentic religious community (Martin, 1999).

One of the prime benefits seen to derive from seeking religion on the Internet is the freedom from church dogma and hierarchy, allowing for open discussions on matters of faith (Chidley, 1997, p. 46). Although pages range from serious professions of faith to self-help, from seemingly frivolous to antagonistically dismissive, most seem to offer a tolerant, polite atmosphere. The nature of computer networks—a sort of “facelessness,” let us say—allows stereotypes to fall away so that people who would otherwise never meet end up being thrown together with the opportunity to speak their minds on all kinds of issues. Educational purposes may be served by this type of environment; the information-sharing democratizes religious dialogue and reduces barriers between faiths, ultimately helping people from many religions understand the common ideas that bind them together. Beliefnet offers dialogue groups for this information-sharing. In order to take advantage of the possibility that the Internet offers to democratize religious dialogue, Beliefnet insists that certain guidelines be followed in these discussions:

Beliefnet members represent a wide variety of religious and spiritual orientations—all are welcome to participate in conversations on our message boards. When you participate in Beliefnet discussions, expect to encounter persons whose beliefs differ from your own. We hope that you will approach these

encounters in a spirit of tolerance, accepting the rights of others to follow freely their own religious beliefs, even if they seem false to you.

Discussions about religion, spirituality and morality can be sensitive, and at times intense. It is not necessary that you agree with others; but we do ask that you treat others with respect and courtesy, even in the midst of disagreement.

The Rules of Conduct are not meant to hamper creative thought and expression, but to make sure that the boards remain clean, safe, respectful, and enjoyable. (emphasis in original)

Beliefnet reserves the right, but not the obligation, to remove posts that malign, vilify, harass, or disrespect others; advocate violence against particular groups or individuals; contain vulgar, obscene, or indecent language or images; or promote illegal activities. These rules are just a sample of the many guidelines set out to ensure that the ability of others to use and enjoy the Web site is not substantially inhibited.

In such a democratized religious climate, it appears that the faithful are leading rather than following. Signing on to the Internet is a transformative act, one which takes the participants into the vast cathedral of the mind, a place where ideas about God and religion can resonate, and where faith can be shaped and defined by a collective spirit; such a faith relies not on great external forces to change the world, but on what ordinary people can create on the World Wide Web (Ramo, 1996, p. 61). Instead of merely passively accepting their faith, participants have the opportunity to deepen it through the challenges they will face to pick apart what they believe in order to defend it. Hypertextuality is an additional factor lending to this creative activity. Bible-study software gives users the ability to move around biblical texts at will, easing and encouraging the process of textual comparison and interpretation. Beliefnet offers searches of sacred texts and advice from experts in order to further aid users to explore their faith.

HOWEVER, this new “hypertheology” is not without its opponents. Some fear that the digital divine is not divine, but demonic, or at least a block to true religious pursuits (Lawrence, 2000). Online religious resources might become substitutes for traditional religious figures, such as Jesus, God, Abraham, and Buddha. Others argue that hypertextuality undermines authorial intent and fixed meaning by divorcing scripture from its literary genre and contextual meaning. Instead of deepening our understanding of what God has communicated, hypertheology actually reinforces the reverse (Kellner, 1997, p. 55). In other words, skeptics are concerned that the pathways to techgnosis (spiritual insight via the Web) may lead away from traditional structures of worship and the living communities that support them. In other words, cyberspace sensibilities—described by Kellner (1997) as the desire for more and more immediate information, superficial surfing mentalities, and impatience with ambiguity—will spill over into other areas of life, such as politics, religion, and education.

The Internet is providing a whole new array of possibilities for faith seekers today. Religious institutions are increasingly integrating the Internet into their everyday practices in order to keep up with their cyber-savvy constituents. Avenues for spiritual exploration in mainstream and non-

traditional veins are opened wide in the electronic environment, making possible new kinds of community ties and relationships to one another and to one's self. This paper, considered only an initial stage in an ongoing study, has attempted to explore the relationship between electronic media, culture, and religion, using a representative Web site to gain insight into how spiritual identity, religious practice, and religious community manifest themselves in a technological world.

Are places to be technological really places where we can also be spiritual? "Across denominations, supporters of the Internet stress that nothing can or should replace personal interaction and communal worship. Still, many believe technology holds immeasurable potential. It offers an audience of millions the chance to explore, rediscover, or express their faith, together with others or privately at their own pace" (Martin, 1999). Using cyberspace to dispense religion as a series of theological ideas could work very well, but could the Internet sufficiently deliver the emotional side of religion and belief that many feel is integral to the very definition of spirituality itself? Technological glitches can make the sacred experience less than revelatory. Admittedly, religion and spirituality are being assimilated by the Internet in various ways, but can we really conceive of a faith community of five billion people plugged into their individual computer terminals?

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