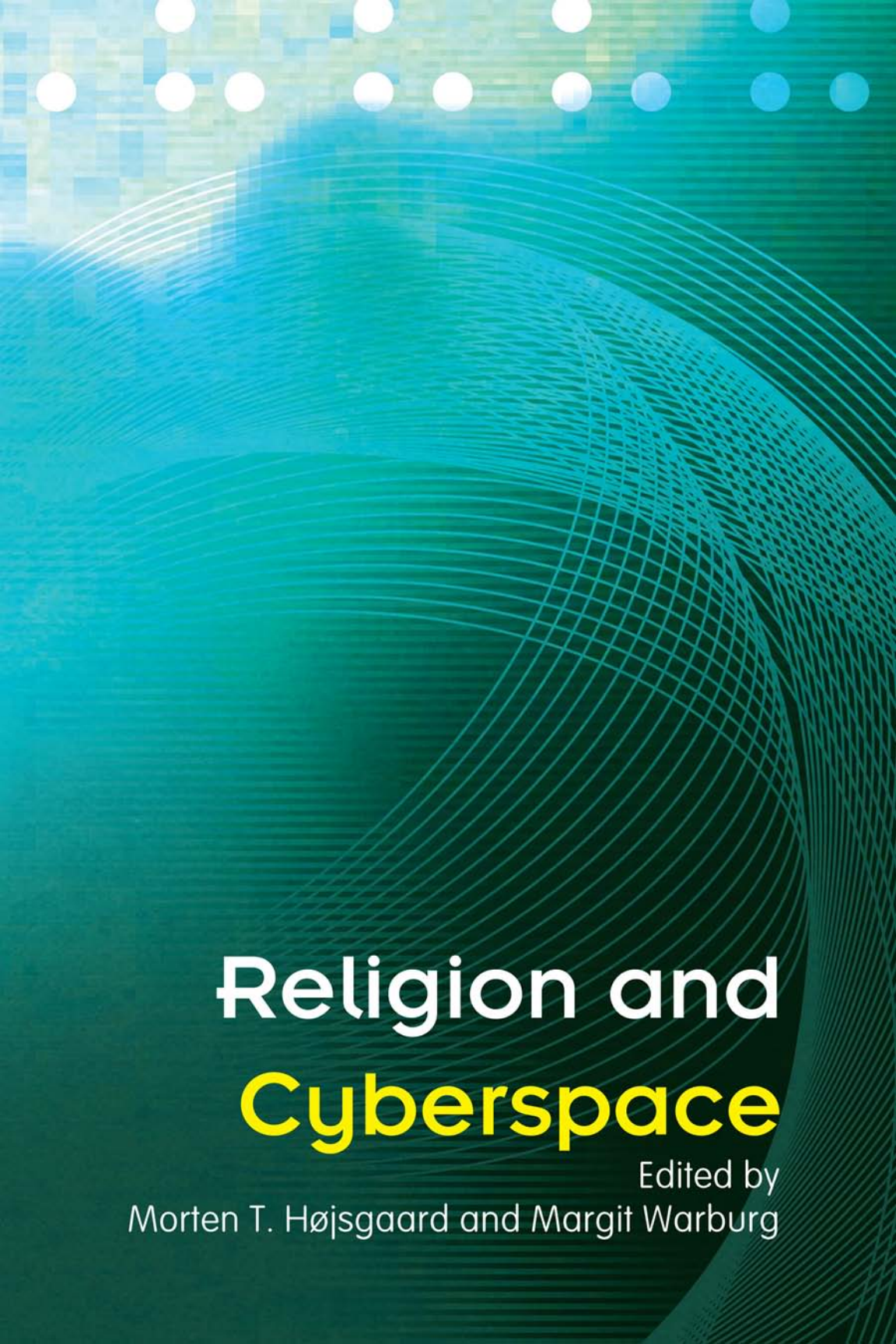
Religion and
Cyberspace
Edited by
Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg

Religion and Cyberspace

In the twenty-first century, religious life is increasingly moving from churches, mosques and temples on to the Internet. Today, anyone can go online and seek a new form of religious expression without ever encountering a physical place of worship, or an ordained teacher or priest. The digital age offers virtual worship, cyber-prayers and talk-boards for all of the major world faiths, as well as for pagan organizations and new religious movements. It also abounds with misinformation, religious bigotry and information terrorism. Scholars of religion need to understand the emerging forum that the Web offers to religion, and the kinds of religious and social interaction that it makes possible.

Religion and Cyberspace explores how religious individuals and groups are responding to the opportunities and challenges that cyberspace brings. It asks how religious experience is generated and enacted online, and how faith is shaped by factors such as limitless choice, lack of religious authority, and the conflict between recognized and non-recognized forms of worship. Combining case studies with the latest theory, its twelve chapters examine topics including the history of online worship, virtuality versus reality in cyberspace, religious conflict in digital contexts, and the construction of religious identity online. Focusing on key themes in this ground-breaking area, it is an ideal introduction to the fascinating questions that religion on the Internet presents.

Contributors: Eileen Barker, Lorne L. Dawson, Debbie Herring, Morten T. Højsgaard, Massimo Introvigne, Mun-Cho Kim, Michael J. Laney, Alf G. Linderman, Mia Lövheim, Mark MacWilliams, Stephen D. O'Leary, David Piff and Margit Warburg.

Morten T. Højsgaard is Internet editor at *Kristeligt Dagblad* (*Christian Daily*) and External Lecturer at the Department of History of Religions at the University of Copenhagen. **Margit Warburg** is a sociologist of religion and Professor at the Department of History of Religions at the University of Copenhagen. Her books include *New Religions and New Religiosity* (1998, co-edited with Eileen Barker) and *Baha'i* (2003).

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Contributors

Eileen Barker, Ph.D., Dr h.c., FBA, OBE, is professor emeritus of sociology with special reference to the sociology of religion at the London School of Economics. She is also the founder and director of INFORM. Her publications include *The Making of a Moonie: Brainwashing or Choice?* (Blackwell, 1984), *New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction* (HMSO, 1989), and 'The Scientific Study of Religion? You Must be Joking!' (*Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1995).

Lorne L. Dawson, Ph.D., is chair of the Department of Religious Studies and an associate professor of sociology at the University of Waterloo, Ontario. He has published many articles on aspects of the sociology of new religious movements, religion and the Internet, and questions of theory and method in the study of religion. Amongst other books, he is the author of *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of the Internet* (Oxford University Press, 1998) and the co-editor (with Douglas Cowan) of *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (Routledge, 2004).

Debbie Herring is a lecturer, academic administrator and doctoral candidate at the Urban Theology Unit, Sheffield and the University of Sheffield. She is also a lecturer at Oxford Brookes University. Her research focuses on the interrelations between theology and cyberspace.

Morten T. Højsgaard, Ph.D., is Internet editor at *Kristeligt Dagblad* (*Christian Daily*) and external lecturer at the Department of History of Religions at the University of Copenhagen. He has published various articles in Danish on religion and information technology. His Ph.D. thesis of 2004 was on networked religion.

Massimo Introvigne, Dr Jur., is managing director of CESNUR, the Centre for Studies on New Religions in Turin. He is also the author of thirty books in Italian (some of them translated into French, German, Spanish, and English) and of more than a hundred chapters of collective books and articles in academic journals. He was the general editor of the *Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia* (Elledici, 2001).

Mun-Cho Kim, Ph.D., is professor of sociology and head of the Programme of Science, Technology and Society Studies at Korea University, Seoul. He has written extensively on work and occupations, the information society, science and technology, religion and social theory. His recent publications include 'Surveillance Technology, Privacy, and Social Control' (*International Sociology*, 19 (2), 2004).

Michael J. Laney, Ph.D., is chair of the Communication and Arts Department and associate professor of telecommunications at Lee University, Cleveland, Tennessee. His dissertation (1998) was entitled 'Motivations for Religious Web Site Usage: An Exploratory Study of Christian Web Site Users'.

Alf G. Linderman, Ph.D., is research assistant professor at Uppsala University and director of the Sigtuna Foundation. He is a sociologist of religion specializing in research into the nexus between media, religion, and culture. He has published work on media reception, on religious television, and on the new media.

Mia Lövheim, Ph.D., is a lecturer in sociology of religion at the Faculty of Theology at Uppsala University. Her research focuses on the construction of religious identity and meaning on the Internet among young men and women. She has published a number of articles within this area in Swedish and in English. Her dissertation (2004) was entitled 'Intersecting Identities: Young People, Religion and Interaction on the Internet'.

Mark MacWilliams, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the Religious Studies Department, St Lawrence University, Canton, New York. His recent publications include 'Virtual Pilgrimages on the Internet' (*Religion*, 2002).

Stephen D. O'Leary, Ph.D., is an associate professor at Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California, Los Angeles. His research focuses on apocalyptic groups, religious transformation, and the interrelations of religion and communication. O'Leary was among the first visionary scholars who published academic articles on the potential of cyberspace as sacred space.

David Piff, Ph.D., is senior archivist at the US National Archives and Records Administration, Pacific Region, San Francisco. He is author of *Baha'i Lore* (George Ronald, 2000).

Margit Warburg is a sociologist of religion and professor at the Department of History of Religions at the University of Copenhagen. She is co-chairing two research networks in Denmark on new religions and cultural encounters respectively. She has published widely on theory and method in the study of religion and religious minorities; among her publications are *New Religions and New Religiosity* (edited with Eileen Barker, Aarhus University Press, 1998) and *Baha'i* (Signature Books, 2003).

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This book is the result of a collaborative effort. As editors we would like to express our sincere appreciation of all the resources that many people and institutions have put into this work.

The basis for the book was the international conference on 'Religion and Computer-Mediated Communication' held in Copenhagen on 1–3 November 2001. The conference was hosted readily by the University of Copenhagen and funded generously by the Danish Research Council for the Humanities and the Danish Social Science Research Council. At the conference more than twenty scholars from such countries as Canada, Italy, the United Kingdom, South Korea, USA, Sweden, and Denmark presented innovative research on the emerging, interdisciplinary field of religious communication on the Internet.

This book includes some carefully selected and thoroughly edited versions of these original research articles. It also comprises a set of new studies on the interrelations of religion and cyberspace. As part of the editorial process of bringing these pieces together, twelve bright students – Anna O. Riis, Brian Jacobsen, Jakob Ussing, Krista Clausen, Lene Jensen, Lene Kofoed, Louise Juul, Marie Louise Wammen, Mette Krabbe, Peter Fischer-Nielsen, Pia From Jeppesen, and Tallat Shakoor – from the University of Copenhagen read and discussed all the articles of the book at a course on religion and cyberspace led by the editors of the book. Without doubt, the final result has benefited from the kind suggestions for improvements made by these students. Likewise the support and interest during the various stages of the editorial work from colleagues such as Eileen Barker, Lorne L. Dawson, Hans Raun Iversen, Göran Larsson, Jørgen S. Nielsen, Erik R. Sand, Garbi Schmidt, Lissi Rasmussen, and Safet Bektovic have been very constructive.

Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg
Copenhagen, December 2004

Chapter 1

Introduction: waves of research

Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg

Our Sysop,
Who art On-Line,
High be thy clearance level.
Thy System up,
Thy Program executed
Off-line as it is on-line.
Give us this logon our database,
And allow our rants,
As we allow those who flame against us.
And do not access us to garbage,
But deliver us from outage.
For thine is the System and the Software
and the Password forever.[1]

What does the Internet do to religion? How are religious experiences mediated online? In what ways have religious individuals and groups used and adapted to the emerging reality of virtual culture?

This book addresses some of the questions that can be raised about the various linkages between religion and cyberspace. It is based on the international conference on 'Religion and Computer-Mediated Communication' held at the University of Copenhagen in 2001, and the chapters of the book are selected from the many contributions to this symposium.

At the outset, the conference aimed at addressing three main, interrelated topics within the academic study of religion and cyberspace, and this is reflected in the organization of the book. Part I deals with the terminology, the epistemology, and the history of this field of research. Part II covers various aspects and transformations of religious authority and conflict in the age of the Internet, and Part III contains analyses of religious identity constructions and group formation dynamics within the online settings of cyberspace.

The first studies of religion and the Internet appeared in the mid-1990s, and the very novelty and potential of the subject were grasped with enthusiasm,

resulting in what can now be seen as the first wave of research (Kinney 1995; Lochhead 1997; O'Leary 1996; Zaleski 1997). Representing a 'second wave' of research on religious communication online (MacWilliams 2002) , an important aim of this book is to document and discuss what kind of knowledge we *actually* have about the religious usage of the Internet. The far-reaching consequences predicted in the first wave will probably not all come true. However, now that the phenomenon of religious communication *in* cyberspace, *on* the Internet, or *through* computer-mediated communication systems has been with us for some years, new insight should be gained by researching the subject again. The conference, which is the basis for the book, proved that a range of scholars in the field agreed that the time was ripe for a revisit.

Stephen D. O'Leary – a scholar of religion and communication who started the 'first wave' of religious studies related to the Internet – in this book reassesses and evaluates the ideas of his earlier works in the light of the present situation. Having had an optimistic approach in his earlier writings, O'Leary admits that his present analyses of religion and cyberspace tend to have a pessimistic tone. Still, he maintains the basic evaluation of computer-mediated communication as something that 'represents a cultural shift comparable in magnitude to the Gutenberg revolution'.

In the words of Lorne L. Dawson in his chapter, the 'interactive potential of computer mediated communication gives it an advantage in mediating religious experience over conventional broadcast media'. Commenting on cyberspace and the new global communication networks as a whole, Eileen Barker in her chapter of the book declares that any 'student of religion – or, indeed, of contemporary society – will ignore this new variable at his or her peril'. Pondering over her warning, the editors hope that this book may mean that any clever student of contemporary religion will be wise enough *not* to ignore the Internet!

Even the Taliban used the Internet

When the Internet was first set up in 1969, it was primarily used for educational and military purposes, and it could not yet qualify as a public sphere as such. However, as the Internet was supplied with a more user-friendly graphical interface and began to grow significantly in the beginning of the 1990s, the religious usage of the new medium also started escalating.

By the end of the 1990s there were more than 1.7 million web pages covering religion. In comparison there were slightly fewer than 5 million web pages containing the word *sex* on the Internet in 1999 (see table 1.1). By 2004, the number of religious web pages had grown considerably worldwide. There were then approximately 51 million pages on religion, 65 million web pages dealing with churches, and 83 million web pages containing the word *God*. As shown in table 1.1, at the same time there were 218 million, 105

Table 1.1 The number of religious web pages in 1999 and 2004

	Web pages in 1999[1]	*Web pages in 2004*[2]	*Absolute increase*	*Relative increase (%)*
Christianity	610,470	9,140,000	8,529,530	1397
Church	7,102,579	65,400,000	58,297,421	820
Computer	66,316,833	218,000,000	151,683,167	228
Cyberchurch	1,054	19,600	18,546	1760
Denomination	144,250	2,090,000	1,945,750	1349
Faith	2,047,530	37,800,000	35,752,470	1746
God	5,287,260	83,200,000	77,712,740	1470
Politics	3,461,870	58,000,000	54,538,130	1575
Religion	1,794,270	51,800,000	50,005,730	2787
Sex	4,490,310	105,000,000	100,509,690	2238
Theology	482,240	5,490,000	5,007,760	1038

Notes

1 The search was conducted via http://www.altavista.digital.com on 24 May 1999 (Højsgaard 1999: 59).

2 The search was conducted via http://www.altavista.com on 16 November 2004.

million, and 58 million Internet pages containing the words *computer*, *sex* and *politics*, respectively.

If these numbers and their growth are indicative of the priorities of human desires in the age of digital information, religion is doing quite well! Surveys made by the Pew Internet and American Life project indicate that – although religion is not the most popular issue of cyberspace – the interest in this subject area among Internet users has become widespread: in 2001 28 million Americans had used the Internet for religious purposes (Larsen 2001). By 2004 the number of persons in the USA who had done things online relating to religious or spiritual matters had grown to almost 82 million (Hoover, Schofield Clark, and Rainie 2004).

Eileen Barker begins her chapter by addressing this remarkable historical change:

> When, in 1995, Jean-François Mayer and I edited a special issue of *Social Compass* devoted to changes in new religions, there was not a single mention of the Internet or the Web. The nearest approximation to the subject was a chance remark I made about the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) having a sophisticated electronic network that could connect devotees throughout the world . . . Indeed, it was at the ISKCON communications centre in Sweden that I had first set eyes on the Internet, and, although I was impressed by the medium's capacity to enable instant contact with fellow devotees throughout the world, it was at least a year later before something of the full import of this new phenomenon really began to dawn on me.

Today, almost every contemporary religious group is present on the Internet. Even the former Taliban regime in Afghanistan had its connections to this global communication network. Officially, the Taliban had forbidden the use of the Internet. However, in 2001 the foreign minister of the Taliban admitted that they were not against the Internet as such, only against what he perceived as 'obscene, immoral and anti-Islamic material' including sex and politics, which lurked 'out there'. The Taliban therefore sought to establish a control system to guard against such material. They knew that controlling access to the unofficial information and uncensored communication possibilities of the Internet was crucial, as it would give all kinds of opportunities to bypass further control of whom you communicate with and what kind of information you send or retrieve.

Having observed various religious communication activities on the Internet for several years, Anastasia Karaflogka (2002: 287–288) documented that while in 1996–1997 there were 865 Internet pages on the Taliban, by the end of 2001 that number had grown to 329,000 pages. This increase, of course, should be seen in the light of the terror acts of 11 September 2001 in New York and Washington. The extraordinarily high growth rate of the material on this particular issue reflects the inevitable rise of attention and interest in the world public during this period. Likewise, other types of religious information and even ways of using the Internet as such have altered over the years as technology, political affairs, and migration patterns have changed. Some of these changes are documented in the pages of this book. Mia Lövheim and Alf Linderman's call for 'more longitudinal studies' is, indeed, still topical.

Also reflecting the constant evolution of interconnections among religious and electronic networks, Mun-Cho Kim in his chapter sets up a historical model of the various steps that an information society may go through. His model starts with the basic computerization stage. It then goes on to the networking stage. It continues with a flexibility stage, and ends up in a cyber-stage (see fig. 9.1). The networking stage may have begun in 1995, which – according to Manuel Castells (2001: 3) among others – was, indeed, 'the first year of widespread use of the world wide web'. The final cyber-stage, however, is a digitally embedded point that has not yet been reached (and probably never will be).

Addressing his own earlier writings on religion and cyberspace, Stephen D. O'Leary, as indicated above, admits that some of his ideas and attitudes towards the idea of cyberspace as a focal sacred space of the information society have changed over the years. 'Though I do have some positive thoughts and hopes on this topic,' he says, 'I will not apologize if, on balance, I [now] seem to espouse cyber-pessimism. In the light of the terror attacks of the past few years, I have found it difficult to maintain the optimistic tone of my earlier writings. In many ways, I now see my early essays as naive and even utopian.' In 1995 O'Leary thought that the Internet in just a few years

would provide a positive and widely used way of experiencing and performing religion. In this book, O'Leary – though still convinced of its importance – expresses doubts about the effects and coverage of the Internet. In the age of digital information, people will still want to meet each other for religious purposes in face-to-face settings. Despite its various virtual representations in cyberspace, the physical Jerusalem, argues O'Leary, will maintain its importance as a holy place and corporeal point of political strife. Besides being a virtual platform for new kinds of religious communication genres, the Internet is also functioning as a supplement to or just a reflection of religion in the modern or postmodern society at large.

If the first wave of religious usage and academic studies of the Internet was filled with either utopian fascination or dystopian anxieties about the surreal potentials of the new digital communication medium, the second wave, in general, tends to be more reflexive and less unrealistic, as it seeks to come to terms with the technological differences, the communication contexts, and the overall transformations of the late modern society. In her doctoral dissertation Mia Lövheim (2004: 267) concludes that uncritical claims about the Internet as something 'new' and separate from other processes in society need to be questioned. Massimo Introvigne, writing for this volume, asserts that while 'celebrations of the Internet as a new and more democratic approach to information were probably premature, dystrophic perspectives of manipulated Internet hierarchies subverting offline hierarchies, destroying responsibility and accountability in the process, need not necessarily prevail'. Common ground for Lövheim and Introvigne – both representing the second wave of research on religious online interaction in this respect – is their shared interest in avoiding either utopian or dystopian extremes in their assessment of the research field. Rather they attempt to focus on the factually situated practice of religious online interaction.

Cyberspace and religion in interaction

Buzzwords without obvious reference to situated practices in general flourish within the literature and the public debate on the Internet and the interactive cultures it has fostered. The culture of cyberspace, for instance, has been characterized by various authors and commentators during the last three or four years by such words and phrases as 'global', 'democratic', 'anti-hierarchical', 'fluctuating', 'dynamic', 'user-oriented', 'virtual', 'visual', 'hyper-textual', 'inter-textual', 'converging', and 'discursive'. The various information and communication technologies that are part of the Internet likewise have been called 'symbols of a *new* world economy', 'voices or mediums of the grass roots', 'reflections of the rise of the network society', 'expressions of the *renaissance* of oral culture', 'the missing link between modern and postmodern mindsets', 'multi-pattern services', 'steps towards

a possible future generation of artificial intelligences', and 'interfaces of human-to-human or human-to-machine dialogue'.

One of the most prevalent ideas that permeate these catchy descriptions of cyber culture is the notion of interactivity or interaction. Accordingly, this book seeks to investigate how a range of all these interactive practices and ideas of interaction in cyberspace are situated, constructed, and related theoretically as well as empirically to the field of religion.

As Mark Poster (1995) has summarily pointed out, the Internet by and large can be used either as a television set or as a telephone. In the first case, the Internet *transmits* messages, religious or not, from content provider(s) to content consumer(s). In the second case, the Internet *connects* people from various places. Given the specific focus on interactivity and interaction that goes through much literature on cyber culture, this latter way of perceiving the Internet also constitutes a special concern of the book. The perception of the Internet as a telephone is not only about connections; it is, of course, also about conversational applications, multi-faceted interactions, networks, individual usages and group formations.

Mun-Cho Kim in this book defines the Internet as a medium with great privacy, a focused audience, multi-way direction, and variable temporality. Along with Mark Poster, Kim thus depicts the Internet as being in clear opposition to the mainstream usage or perception of the television set as a medium with low privacy, a broad audience, one-way direction, and delayed temporality (see table 8.1). Mia Lövheim and Alf Linderman, in their chapter on identity formation in cyberspace, add further insights to the understanding of the Internet as a medium that facilitates multi-directed connections rather than one-way transmissions. They use the terms *information exchange*, *interactivity*, and *interdependence* to describe some of the most important aspects or facets that must be taken into consideration before evaluating the religious impact of the Internet. Information exchange is the category they consider the most basic form of connection in this respect. Interdependence is the category they consider as the most advanced form of connection in relation to identity building and group formation on the Internet.

In a similar manner, Massimo Introvigne highlights three foundational aspects of Internet usage – the personal, the interpersonal, and the transpersonal. Personal usage involves externalized information. Interpersonal usage entails objectified information. Transpersonal usage includes imaginary communication and involves internalized information as well. In sum, the level of personal involvement and commitment in religious and/or non-religious communication on the Internet varies, and the evaluation of the religious and social significance of the individual usages of the Internet for religious purposes should therefore also vary.

In this book, many chapters are specifically aimed at studying the varying relationships between religion and cyberspace with special reference to the different religious usages of the Net such as mailing lists, message boards,

and news groups. As indicated above, such applications play a key role in establishing, maintaining, and transforming institutional authorities, personal experiences and social interactions across conventional boundaries of time and space.

As such, the total collection of religious materials and interactive applications of the Internet make up a *heteroglossia* of meanings and possible interpretations. No single authority or control mechanism can prevail in cyberspace, and no user can be assured of the stability of his or her identity. In cyberspace there will always be another, perhaps new, way of looking at it. The Internet can challenge plausibility structures, give voice to unofficial sources, and provide communication spots for new horizontal networks. This new global network technology thus offers yet another possibility for citizens in contemporary society who are seeking the freedom to bypass established religious institutions, just as the newly invented printing press provided new means of disseminating religious protest or anti-monopoly material during the Reformation period five hundred years ago.

Despite the potential danger of losing members, in general the religious organizations of contemporary society have wholeheartedly embraced the offerings of cyberspace. It seems to be vital for these groups, as David Piff and Margit Warburg note, to 'make a good appearance before the world'. Data from both international and regional surveys among webmasters for religious organizations indicate that their first priority is to present their group to the general public and to address people not yet affiliated with the group (Wolf 1998; Højsgaard 1999; see also Horsfall 2000). By doing this, these webmasters of religious organizations, however, are merely adding to the complexity, plurality, and information surplus of the field.

Cyberspace, as Dale F. Eickelman (1999) has put it, basically represents a 'multiplication of voices'. Among other things, this multiplication of voices means that conventional or exclusive beliefs, practices, and organizational authorities are being confronted with alternative solutions, competing worldviews, and sub- or inter-group formations. In this interactive environment of increasing pluralism, reflexivity, and multiple individual possibilities, new ways of structuring and thinking about issues such as reality, authority, identity, and community are inevitably emerging. And that is, indeed, what this book is all about.

Another X

The study of religion and 'X' (where 'X' stands for some societal category or phenomenon such as gender or the Internet) is typical in the sociology of religion and calls for interdisciplinary research. Depending on the nature of 'X', scholars with backgrounds other than the sociology of religion are not only welcome to contribute to the topic; their particular expertises are invaluable. In this book chapters by sociologists of religion have thus

beneficially been supplemented by contributions from disciplines such as communication studies (Michael Laney and Stephen D. O'Leary), law (Massimo Introvigne), sociology (Mun-Cho Kim), and theology (Debbie Herring).

The twelve chapters in the book cover a variety of religious traditions and communication formats. Transformations in Christian Web usage are discussed (Michael Laney, Debbie Herring), and so are analyses of digital communication related to Buddhism (Mun-Cho Kim), Islam (Massimo Introvigne), Baha'i (David Piff and Margit Warburg), and Judaism (Stephen D. O'Leary). A distinctive issue that highlights the innovative potential of the new information technology is the usage of the Internet among new religious movements such as Branch Davidians (Mark MacWilliams), cyber-religions (Morten T. Højsgaard), Scientology (Massimo Introvigne), and Wiccans (Mia Lövheim and Alf Linderman).

Religion and the X of cyberspace is a topic driven by many chaotic forces from globalization to technological innovation. Most likely the Internet itself will continue to undergo fundamental and complex changes with respect to its individual and societal significance. Also, the religious landscape of the twenty-first century will continuously go through alterations and transformations.

With regard to methodology, the diversity or plurality of the chapters in the book is also manifest. Some of the contributions are based on survey analyses amongst religious Internet and news group users (Debbie Herring, Mun-Cho Kim, Michael Laney). Other contributions have interviews with religious online users or editors as their point of departure (Eileen Barker, Mia Lövheim and Alf Linderman, Mark MacWilliams). Various techniques of measuring information flows on the Internet are adopted in another chapter (Morten T. Højsgaard), and, finally, a widespread range of factual contents of religious online communication is analysed at length in the remaining chapters. Not only does Internet research thus involve many interdisciplinary efforts, it is also an area that is irresistibly drawn into multi-methodological studies. It is therefore with good reason that this book has a wide coverage with respect to the empirical areas and the academic background of the contributors.

Towards the third wave

In only a few years, the academic study of religion on the Internet has moved from its first wave of research – focusing on the fascinating, new, and extra-ordinary aspects of cyberspace – to its second wave that tends to emphasize the diversity of the field and the need to put new findings into a broader historical and social perspective. In the first wave of research on religion and cyberspace, computers and the Internet could (and probably would) do almost anything. The Internet could create new religions existing only in

cyberspace. 'Information technology is here,' said David Lochhead (1997: xiv), and it 'is transforming our world. It is transforming us.' 'The computer', said Brenda Brasher (2001: 141) in her first book on the subject, 'reconfigures the content of what we do and redefines precisely who we are.'

In the second wave of research on religion in cyberspace, the significance of computer networks is not neglected, but is put into a more realistic perspective. 'The Internet does not generate religion, only people do . . . The allegedly pure cyber-religious sites *are* being produced and used by persons who do not live their entire lives "on the screen"', says Morten T. Højsgaard in this book. Stephen D. O'Leary – the man who presented the idea of cyberspace as sacred space to the academic public – now asks: 'Isn't the physicality of the place itself something that cannot be dispensed with? How could a cyber-temple ever replace the actual wall of the real one?' Commenting on earlier works by J. Zaleski (1997) and M. Wertheim (1999) among others, the second-wave researcher of religion and cyberspace Patrick Maxwell (2002: 43) correspondingly makes a call for 'broader sociological, psychological, political and even philosophical debates about online identity, online community and related topics'.

A typical first-wave analysis of the Cyberpunk's Prayer – quoted at the beginning of this Introduction – would thus focus on the newness of the vocabulary and the computer-loaded, anti-clerical imagery and sarcasm of this text. An emblematic second-wave interpretation, however, would rather focus on the fact that the structure of the prayer in any case bears close resemblance to the structure of the Lord's Prayer in the Christian Bible (King James Version). The overall framework of the supposed religious transformation formulated in the Cyberpunk's Prayer is thus inescapably of a rather traditional kind. In the first wave, God had become a system operator. In the second wave, God is just like such a Sysop (Højsgaard 2001).

It is, of course, a risky business to make projections about future research. However, we believe that because of its chaotic and complex development, religion and the Internet will continuously be a topic that needs to be addressed by scholars with very different approaches. In the light of that, a *bricolage* of scholarship coming from different backgrounds and with diverse methodological preferences may very well indicate that the topic is maturing academically, and that it is maturing well. The third wave of research on religion and cyberspace may be just around the corner.

Note

1 This prayer – The Cyberpunk's Prayer – was written by Bill Scarborough of Austin, Texas. It was first published in an article by Stephen D. O'Leary and Brenda Brasher in 1996. In a mail correspondence with Stephen O'Leary, Scarborough stated at that time that this prayer was 'not copyrighted. Anyone

is free to quote, repost, or reprint all or part of it' (O'Leary and Brasher 1996: 266).

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