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# Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society

Heidi A. Campbell\*

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This article suggests that religious practice online, rather than simply transforming religion, highlights shifts occurring within broader Western culture. The concept of “networked religion” is introduced as a way to encapsulate how religion functions online and suggests that online religion exemplifies several key social and cultural changes at work in religion in general society. Networked religion is defined by five key traits—networked community, storied identities, shifting authority, convergent practice, and a multisite reality—that highlight central research topics and questions explored within the study of religion and the internet. Studying religion on the internet provides insights not only into the common attributes of religious practice online, but helps explain current trends within the practice of religion and even social interactions in networked society.

IN 1996, Stephen O’Leary asserted that religion online would eventually transform religious beliefs and practices in revolutionary ways.

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This led to much speculation about the future of religion and the potential of the internet to alter and reshape the very nature of religion in the twenty-first century. In the last fifteen years, researchers have explored how religious authority, community, identity, and rituals have been performed on the internet and the unique nature of religion online. However, while initial speculation suggested the nature of contemporary religion might be completely altered due to online engagement, current research suggests the features of religion online closely mirror changes within the practice of religion in contemporary society.

A critical literature review reveals that religious practice online is marked by a set of common characteristics, which are shaped by the network structure and functionality of information communication technologies. These key traits include facilitating a networked community, storied identities, shifting authority, convergent practice, and a multisite reality. Together, these characteristics present an understanding of religion that is informed by a dynamic and integrated relationship between the sacred and the mundane online. The idea of “networked religion” encapsulates how religious experience, belief, and practice are lived out online through dynamic social relations and interaction. In this article, I argue that the network image helps us examine the complex interplay and negotiations occurring between the individual and the community, new and old sources of authority, and public and private identities in a networked society. The concept of networked religion highlights cultural and social shifts occurring both online and offline. Thus, this article argues that online technology use and choices cannot be easily disembedded from offline contexts and so requires looking at how offline practices guide online beliefs and behaviors.

This article begins with a brief history and analysis of the rise of the study of religion online to explore the extent to which the internet transforms religion and/or reflects broader changes occurring within offline religious culture. By investigating key research studies detailing how religion is practiced online, several common themes emerge. These encapsulate a distinctive understanding of how religion is being performed by individuals and communities. Together the five traits of networked religion provide insights into how religious practice is not just altered as it is imported online, but how religion on the internet reflects subtle shifts in religious cultural practice offline that have also been noted within studies of religious culture in general. These characteristics create an interpretive model for explaining certain aspects of religious life within a networked society. In this way, this article presents a critical analysis of the nature of religion online that not only points to

indicators of the current state of religion, but also illuminates the social reality of life in a networked society.

## RELIGION IN AN AGE OF INTERNET

Since the publication of O'Leary's study (1996) asserting how the internet functions as sacred space for religious practitioners, a corpus of research has been gathered, allowing scholars to begin to make informed claims about the social implications raised by religious practice online. Early scholarship often suggested that using the internet for religious purposes might possibly transform religious practice and ideology in revolutionary ways, from challenging the roles of traditional religious authorities to altering religious expectations of community and connection (O'Leary 1996; Brasher 2001; Dawson and Cowan 2004). From such research, it has been valid to assert that employing digital, mobile technologies to support traditional religious practices is shaping many people's understanding of religious praxis. However, when one considers the full range of research dealing with the intersection of religion, new media, and culture, simply making the claim that the internet is transforming religious culture is naïve and lacks the necessary nuances of critical reflection. There is a need to consider claims about the influence of the internet on religion in light of the shift already occurring within Western religious culture. For example, scholars of the religion of the internet have often stressed that religion online encourages fluctuating networked group affiliations (Campbell 2005a), greater flexibility in religious identity construction (Lövhelm 2004), and a fluidity of religious ritual performed online (Radde-Antweiler 2008). These trends relating to the loosening of traditional boundaries and affiliations have been observed and documented by many sociologists of religion, as well (Marsden 2000; Roof 2000). Recent research has also sought to offer a more detailed account of the relationship between online and offline religious practice and relationships (e.g., Helland 2007; Kluver and Cheong 2007; Campbell 2010a). Thus the study of religion online provides an interesting and important microcosm for studying trends within religious practice and meaning-making in society.

In recent decades, scholars of religion have paid increasing attention to how public practice and understanding of religion often goes beyond adherence to traditional religious rituals and institutions to incorporate the performance of religious belief outside traditional structures. This tendency has been described as "lived religion," meaning many religious symbols and narratives become freed from their traditional structures and dogmas and so become tools for reconstructing spiritual meaning

in daily life (Hall 1997). Approaching religion in terms of lived practice highlights how hybridity can occur as practitioners combine religious language rituals, ideas, and artifacts from multiple traditions or interpretations, even those previously seen as nonreligious. The language and images of the sacred thus become definitional tools to redefine contemporary life (Ammerman 2006). This tendency toward lived religion, where traditional rituals and meanings become malleable and adaptable, is clearly mirrored within many forms of religious engagement online. It is from this perspective that I suggest religion online needs to be explored. A careful analysis of core characteristics of religion online, considered in light of trends within the general practice of religion, especially within Western contexts, leads to a distinctive description of contemporary religious practice that I suggest is summed up by the concept of “networked religion.”

### TRAITS OF NETWORKED RELIGION

In order to identify the common themes and issues within the study of religion online, a critical review of research was conducted of noted sources within the study of religion online. This included chapters from three often-cited edited collections on religion online (Hadden and Cowan 2000; Dawson and Cowan 2004; Hojsgaard and Warburg 2005) as well as a number of journal special issues on religion and the internet from the past decade, including *Religion* (2002), *Online: Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* (2005–10), *Religious Studies Review* (2006), *Studies in World Christianity* (2007), *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* (2007), *Masaryk University Journal of Law and Technology* (2009), and the *Australian Religious Studies Review* (2010). From a review of these articles and chapters, a number of common research topics can easily be noted, including the study of religious identity, community, authority, religious practices or ritual online, and the relationship between online and offline religion. These topics also point to several common research questions, including how the internet contributes to the construction of religious identities, supports new forms of community, highlights changing understandings of authority, encourages the mixing of traditional and new forms of social practice, and recognizes the interconnectedness between online and offline contexts. It is from these common themes and questions that the notion of “networked religion” emerges as a way to encapsulate how religion functions and is performed online.

From this review of research, it can be argued that religion online functions within a network of interactions, in which social relationships,

structures, and patterns of belief become highly malleable, global, and interconnected. This complements discourse about “networked society” which argues that there is a shift in the structure and understanding of how social, political, and economic worlds function in global society. This creates what sociologists such as Manuel Castells (1996) and others assert is the rise of a network-based society where these social relations are increasingly decentralized, yet interconnected and often supported by a social–technical infrastructure. The idea of networked religion suggests that religion, especially that which is found online, is informed by the technological structures and characteristics of the internet such as flattening of traditional hierarchies, encouraging instantaneous communication and response, and widening access to sacred or once-private information. The nature of computer-networked society means conventional forms of connection, hierarchy, and identity management must adapt or be reconfigured as they are transported online. It is argued that networked religion is characterized by five central traits: networked community, storied identity, shifting authority, convergent practice, and multisite reality. However, if we look closely at the nature of these five traits defining religion online, two things become clear. First is that many of these social and structural shifts observed are not unique to the practice of religion online, but are changes also observed and investigated within internet studies as markers of the impact of the internet on the social sphere. Thus online practices are often clearly embedded in the values or systems of offline culture. Second, if we further expand our investigation into the offline context, it can be seen that these trends are also evident in shifts occurring within the general practice and conception of religion, especially within Western culture.

### Networked Community

Central to the idea of networked religion is that religious practice emerges within a distinctive social sphere constructed of networked interactions. Key to the study of religion online has been the investigation of the emergence of online religious communities. Much interest has been paid to how web-based groups shape their member’s conception of and participation in offline religious communities. Researchers have carefully explored how involvement in online communities may inform members’ understanding of what it means to be part of a religious community or church and how this may alter expectations of how community should live offline. The result of much of this research has been a transformation in how religious communities are conceived of online, seeing as they function quite differently than traditional religious institutions and structures. Rather than operating as tightly bounded

social structures, they function as loose social networks with varying levels of religious affiliation and commitment. The concept of networked community suggests this change in the conception and function of community within online contexts.

In the late 1990s, researchers began to investigate this new sense of community emerging around many online groups with religious connections. Their investigations ranged from explorations of online fatwas in Islamic online communities (Bunt 2000) and Buddhist cybersanghas (Taylor 2003) as new communities of religious practice, to the challenges raised by the framing of online groups as “congregations of the disembodied” (Campbell 2003) or giving marginalized fundamentalist communities a discursive platform (Howard 2000). This research soon shifted from descriptive studies to exploring members’ motivation for joining and investing in online communities as well as considering how online participation might affect offline religion and community. Studies of Christian community online showed that Internet Christianity is not unconnected from offline Christianity (Young 2004) even though traditional communal rituals and practice may need to be modified in some form as they are imported online (Campbell 2003). The fear inspired by the online religious community in offline religious institutions was addressed by studies finding that community online served as a “supplement, not substitute” for offline church involvement (Campbell 2005a) as members joined online communities in order to meet specific relational needs, yet recognized that they could not fully meet social needs and a desire for shared embodied worship experience in this context. Researchers also began to recognize that patterns of being in these online communities pointed to transformations in traditional understandings of community through online participation. The social structures and interactions found within online groups requires a new understanding of how contemporary religious organizations function. It also requires considering more closely their interpretive, interactive, and integrative roles rather than just their instrumental functions (Kim 2005). Both of these findings illustrate how individuals live between multiple social spheres and groups, which lends itself toward a networked understanding of community where individuals create webs of connection between different social contexts to create a personalized network of relations.

One of the clearest examples of networked community is seen in the rise of cyberchurches, entities that create spaces for people to engage in worship-based activities online. Increasingly cyberchurches can be found in virtual environments, such as Second Life, where individuals construct virtual 3D architectures meant to mirror traditional

church or temple structures where religious practices can be simulated. These entities may exist solely online or have overlapping connections with offline churches and institutions. What makes cyberchurches a form of networked community are the ways these settings can supplement or extend people's offline religious participation, by offering intimate fellowship with others or providing connections to a like-minded theological context. For instance, the Anglican Cathedral in Second Life seeks to offer an Anglican experience online, drawing more than four hundred participants to its multiple weekly services. Through conscious planning, they have developed official links with the Anglican Communion offline (Campbell 2010a). Thus it exists as a third place, a place of socialization between public and private forums, providing a space to build personal social connections with others online as well as affiliate with the larger Anglican community. The cybercathedral helps foster unique socialization patterns between individuals and institutions. Participants also laud such settings for offering higher levels of control over the environment and the individual's extent of social engagement than afforded in offline churches (Hutchings forthcoming). Thus cyberchurches create the potential for an individualized communal experience, expressive of networked community with varying degrees of depth and affiliation. The network metaphor has thus become important in describing and understanding social relations online and offline.

Seeing religious community as a social network is not limited to studies of religion online. Scholars of contemporary religious community increasingly employ a social network approach in their analysis of religious organizations. For example, Nancy Ammerman's study of congregations clearly framed community as "functioning as a network" (1997: 346) and asserted that "understanding of the social systems of modern life must start with the individual's network of relations" and thus congregations should be approached as part of the social network of a community (352). Using a social network analysis approach has also been noted in a number of studies of religious institutions and groups to assess levels of religious investment (Ellison and George 1994) or degrees of social capital (Smith 2003). It has also been asserted that the network metaphor provides a more accurate description of contemporary patterns of relationships, and so proves very useful for sociological studies of religious community (Campbell 2004). Community as a network thus provides an important new narrative and research tool for investigating emerging relations and interaction occurring within contemporary religious organization and groups.

The concept of networked community provides a valuable lens for describing the function of community both online and offline,



especially within contemporary Western society. The study of online religious community shows that, rather than living in a single static religious community, people in contemporary society live in religious social networks that are emergent, varying in depth, fluid, and highly personalized.

### Storied Identity

In his work on identity, [Erving Goffman \(1959\)](#) takes a dramaturgical approach, where social identity is seen as something that is performed by the individual actor, who draws from a variety of communicative sources in order to create and perform a given persona. Focusing on late modernity, [Anthony Giddens \(1991\)](#) argues that identity is a highly malleable form, rather than something that is fixed and simply accepted or rejected. In both approaches, the social sphere offers individuals various resources and meanings from which they can select, assemble, and present a sense of self. It is clear from research that religious identity is not simply absorbed through internet engagement, nor is it purely imported from the offline context. Identity is both constructed and performed, as internet users draw on multiple resources available online. These processes of construction and performance often lead people to seek out a storied identity as they attempt to find and create coherence amidst the fluidity of the internet. Here the self may be assembled through a variety of different resources that create a distinctive narrative from which meaning-making and commonality can be derived. This is especially true of religious identity and raises many questions related to the complexities of selection, assemblage, and presentation of such an identity.

There has been great interest in how the internet empowers religious internet users to create and perform religious identity online. Attention has been given to how online religious practice may create new, dynamic opportunities for self-expression of belief and religious lifestyle practice than are allowed in traditional religious contexts. Researchers have suggested that bringing religion online encourages religious experimentation in ways that may lead to alternative, highly personalized narratives of faith. Traditionally, studies of religion are concerned with the integration, consolidation, and control of certain religious identities by groups and institutions. Yet the mediation of social relations through computer technology often bypasses these traditional structures of identity formation, which adds a new level of complexity to such studies. Researchers studying religious individuals online have observed changes in the function that traditional religion plays in the processes of identity construction in late modernity. Such studies investigate the specific

ways individuals were being empowered or affected within online environments (O'Leary and Brasher 1996; Fernback 2002). Many of these studies focus on young people's experiences of identity negotiation (Linderman and Lövheim 2003; Lövheim 2004), users interested in new religious movements (Berger and Ezzy 2004), and religious minority groups (Cheong and Poon 2009). This research shows the internet does offer new methods and possibilities for constructing religious identities, especially for people who lack such opportunities in the local or offline context (Hennebry and Dawson 1999).

The formation of storied identity online can be seen in the practices of many religious bloggers. Blogging involves individuals who keep an online journal focused on personal content, commonly intended for a public audience. While blogs can cover a multitude of themes from parenting advice to sports fandom, researchers have found that religious bloggers frequently blog about their faith practices by chronicling their spiritual journey, offering a prophetic voice in relation to a personally defined religious mission, or using the forum for apologetics and occasionally for venting on religious debates (Cheong et al. 2008; Campbell 2010b). In many respects, religious blogging becomes about constructing and performing a specific religious identity online through a process of religious self-identification. This is done by framing and justifying blogging practice in religious terms, such as bloggers who affiliate themselves with religious blog rings or networks, such as The Christian Woman Blog List (<http://www.thechristianwoman.com/christian-resources/christian-women-blogs.html>) or Top Muslim Blogs (<http://www.topmuslimblogs.com/>), or link themselves to a specific religion via Technorati tags.<sup>1</sup> A blogger's storied identity emerges through religious connections and choices made online, such as highlighting institutional and faith group affiliations in their postings or through adding a links list to their blog. While this may seem to suggest religious bloggers primarily frame themselves in terms of traditional affiliations, research has shown that these can be highly contextualized linkages (Campbell 2011b). In other words, religious bloggers commonly serve as armchair theologians or cultural critics as they selectively affirm only certain religious authorities, texts, or structures, stressing the ways in which these both coalesce and diverge from their personal beliefs. This shows that religious bloggers shape the

<sup>1</sup>Technorati is a blog search engine. Technorati tags are keywords or categories used by bloggers to describe the subject matter of a specific blog or posting. Tagging allows individual to link to a specific topic and enables their blogs and/or entries to be identified and searchable online via the designated term.

blogosphere in line with their personalized understanding of spirituality; thus, religious blogging is both community-oriented and individualized simultaneously.

Storied identity also affirms an individual's ability to use the internet as a tool to assemble religious identities in ways that are less structured than traditional norms or avenues allowed by official instructions (Lövhelm and Linderman, 2005). Yet the anonymity and transience of online interactions can also bring unintended consequences such as identity fragmentation, leading to increased insecurity, and, in some instances, conflict between the truth claims of online authorities and religious leaders and their offline counterparts. It has been suggested that such experiences can inhibit an individual's ability to develop a cohesive religious identity further, or to restrict one's reaffirmation of boundaries between different interpretations of religion and religious identity, for example, between authentic or "serious" religious identities and "fake" versions (Lövhelm 2004; Linderman and Lövhelm 2003). Current research on religious identity online affirms findings within studies of online religious community that finds online interaction often becomes a supplement and not a substitute for offline religious engagement (Clark 2004). Thus, expressions of one's storied identity online are not separate from their identity outside the internet, and should not be studied as such. The internet becomes a place for living out the religious self, which can combine both experimentation with different ways of being and evaluation and adoption of traditional identity roles.

The work of Giddens (1991) and others (Kellner 1995; Sarup 1996) has suggested that a condition of late modernity is the fragmentation, uncertainty, and commodification of identity. The study of storied religious identity is not wholly unique, but closely follows the questions emerging in the larger study of the influence of the internet on society. The notion of identity as a process of construction or performance is also not unique to discussions of internet culture. This results in individuals needing to search out resources to help construct a genuine sense of self. So the internet can serve as a rich reservoir of resources in this situation of identity construction (Castells 1996). Scholars have examined the function of religion in identity negotiations and its relation to changes in other arenas of late modern society (as suggested by Dawson 2000: 45 and Slevin 2000). These studies have found the internet challenges the role that religion traditionally has played in the process of socialization into an accepted religious belief and community. Such findings show the possibilities of sharing information, connecting to like-minded people, and creating supportive networks that

offer new options for living out a storied religious identity for people who lack such opportunities in the local context. Storied identity acknowledges that identity construction is a process lived out online and offline and mirrors the understanding that while people often play with multiple identities, there is still often a push to unify them.

### Shifting Authority

The malleability of religious community and identity online has contributed to a struggle between traditional sources of religious authority and new authority figures appearing online. The fluidity and transience of online environments poses challenges to traditional authority structures, roles, and tools. The result has been that the internet is framed both as a threat to certain established roles and hierarchies and as a tool of empowerment by others. The tensions created highlight the fact that the internet represents a sphere for the renegotiation and canonization of accepted sources of authority as religious web masters, forum moderators, and expert bloggers become framed as sources of religious knowledge and, through this recognition online, acclaim sources of power. Yet the internet is also being framed by some offline religious authorities as a realm in which to solidify their position and control. This means some religious groups try to dictate members' internet usage or even attempt to use the internet to monitor their members' beliefs and behavior. This reveals that the internet becomes a realm of contention and shifting power.

Scholars have frequently argued that new media potentially create new classes of religious authority as web masters, moderators, and bloggers begin to assume positions of power and prominence online and even offline. It is recognized that the structure of web sites and discussion forums offers a platform of influence often not available to users offline, as they become interpreters of religious belief and culture online. Jon Anderson's early work on Islam online (1999) identified several new forms of religious interpreters arising, highlighting the internet's ability to create positions of religious power outside traditional structures. Other scholars have noted that the internet facilitates the rise of "instant experts," allowing people to rise to positions of influence through perceived expertise online while bypassing time-honored training or prescribed initiation rites that would establish their position offline (Berger and Ezzy 2004; Krogh and Pillfant 2004). Online leadership roles, it is suggested, have the potential to influence individuals' standing in their offline religious community; thus, the internet offers the ability to change offline religious power hierarchies by introducing new forms of governing authority (Thumma 2000;

Herring 2004). Besides the rise of new authority roles, researchers note that the internet allows for the transgression of official religious structures. Online groups may take discussions normally reserved for institutional administrators into public forums, empowering members in ways not possible offline, where online interpretations of religious beliefs and policy may differ from official position (Piff and Warburg 2005). This means that the generation of religious capital online becomes a new source of religious authority, as internet users take advantage of opportunities and positions they do not have in the offline world (Helland 2008). We also see a rise of information sites that challenge traditional, legitimate sources of sacred knowledge (Turner 2007).

However, while the internet creates complexities for offline religious authorities, it can also provide unique opportunities for them to maintain or re-establish control. Offline religious authorities may infiltrate their online counterparts in order to monitor members' beliefs and behaviors and use such knowledge to create alternative forums to reinforce their established structure (Barker 2005). Some communities may establish official policies or filtering tools in order to define acceptable internet use and thereby control online behaviors (Campbell 2010a; Campbell 2007), including putting public pressure on community members who seek to be the face of the community online. This means the internet can be used to both undermine and empower traditional religious leaders. Thus religious users who utilize the internet as a space to find a public voice and gain influence offline may encounter positive and negative outcomes in relation to their offline communities.

The tensions created by the shifting authority online are clearly seen in many conservative religious groups' responses to their members' use of the internet. For instance, much debate and controversy has arisen within Israeli Orthodox groups related to how the internet may allow individuals to bypass normal community boundaries and religious gatekeepers to engage with problematic aspects of modernity found online. In 1999 and again in 2010, certain ultra-Orthodox rabbis in Israel issued a ban regarding internet use for their community members (Campbell 2011a). The initial ban, issued by the Belz community, was against all internet use, but this was later overturned due to community pressure, so rabbis grudgingly approved access to certain individuals for work-related purposes, as long as tightly controlled filtering software was in place. The most recent ban was aimed at specific religious internet web sites, such as Bhadrei *Haredim* (or [Bhol.co.il](http://Bhol.co.il)), a web portal and discussion forum offering a private conversation space for the Haredi public online. Many rabbis felt such forums, supervised by religious entrepreneurs who created new spaces for religious dialogue and

engagement outside the traditional boundaries, were undermining communal authority and control. Here we see shifting authority at work, as webmasters served as unofficial religious leaders due to the opportunities they offered their communities online (Campbell and Golan 2011). This provoked offline community officials to attempt to exert control online, in order to re-establish their influence and position within the wider community. Webmasters, designers, and online forum managers represent new forms of religious authority that often unintentionally shift the power relations within religious groups, creating unique challenges related to who does or should serve as a legitimate religious authority in an internet age.

When explored more closely, research on the challenges faced by religious authorities online clearly echoes studies within the sociology of religion on changes occurring regarding the perception and performance of offline religious authority in contemporary society. Mark Chaves (1994) argues that secularization might more accurately be seen as a decline in influence of religious authority in society. He further argues that there is a considerable narrowing of influence of religious professionals in the current public sphere, as their capacity to act authoritatively and make decisions that impact the larger society has been reduced (Chaves 2003). Thus the study of religious authority online provides valuable insight into these shifts in power as the online context often reflects the current social dynamics and tensions religious authorities are faced with offline. Shifting religious authority in the internet age raises important questions not only about who has the true legitimate voice for a particular religious tradition or community, but also their status and realm of influence in the larger social sphere.

### Convergent Practice

Attention to how traditional understandings of community, identity, and authority are altered online centers around the observations of how religion is practiced on the internet. Studies of religion online have observed that traditional religious ritual often must be adapted to fit within the technological structures and constraints of the internet. Also, the fluid network of interactions and information may encourage the blending of rituals and information from multiple sources in ways that build a self-directed form of spiritual engagement online. The internet serves as a spiritual hub, allowing practitioners to select from a vast array of resources and experience in order to assemble and personalize their religious behavior and belief. This encourages a convergent form of religious practice online, a process that allows and even encourages users to draw from traditional and new sources simultaneously. The

technological landscape of the internet removes many traditional entry barriers, allowing religious users new levels of freedom to create and access information. This can increase their repertoire of possibilities for how they interpret and express their religious lives online. For many, this means greater exposure to a myriad of spiritual beliefs, forms, and interpretations than they would otherwise have access to, both from within and without their religious tradition. This creates the possibility of creating new hybrids of traditional religions as different forms of knowledge and practice are combined to create individualized patterns of spiritual life. The internet thus becomes for many a religious marketplace, encouraging users to seek out preferred information or establish personalized practices, rather than simply link to an official religious institution or mirror set protocols like they might have done in the past.

The convergent practices of religious internet users have been explored in-depth within ritual studies of the internet. Initial investigation found that early religious adopters of the internet readily embraced the internet as a sacred space in order to both import traditional rituals online and create new forms of religiosity online (Brasher and O'Leary 1996). Thus the internet was framed as a technological landscape, able to transform religious expression and understanding. Studies have documented the adoption and adaptation of various religious forms in online environments such as prayer, chanting, and meditation (O'Leary 1996; Schroeder et al. 1994), the creation of ritual worship spaces such as cyber-altars or shrines (Brasher 2001; Cowan 2005), and the performance of online ceremonies and new forms of worship services (Young 2004; Prebish 2004). Helland (2008) argues that the very structure of the internet supports and even encourages the emergence of diverse religious traditions. Importing traditional religious rituals and artifacts online means religious practitioners have the opportunity to reinterpret the context and use, thereby transforming traditional practice in ways that may challenge offline ecclesiastical organizations (MacWilliams 2006). The fluidity of hypertexts and hyperlinks also creates new possibilities for spiritual pilgrimage as well as linking different ideas and concepts together. As the internet empowers religious seekers with a certain degree of autonomy, and as more religious information becomes available online, it facilitates a new freedom in the acquisition of ritual knowledge that may bypass normal required initiation rites (Krueger 2004). This encourages the personal pursuit of religious knowledge that will benefit the chosen life practice of the individual religious practitioner. Because this religious practice is taking place within an online religious community, it may not be so much



about the collective performance of a set of rituals, but about the freedom of collective reinterpretation, as online groups become primarily constituted as a conversational community instead of a ritual public (Krueger 2005). Therefore, through sharing new ideas and reinterpretation of symbols related to religious practice, an experiential environment is created allowing the group to be together yet separately live out their spiritualities.

Multiple examples of online ritual that exhibit traits of convergent practices can be found, from the adaptation of traditional forms of prayer and sacrifice in virtual temples (such as the practice of online puja) to the creation of online rituals that combine traditional and personalized interpretation of accepted religious practices, such as those seen in many neopagan covens online. The dynamic nature of the internet allows people to modify and perform religious ritual outside traditional contexts, so they can easily modify the customs and even meaning attached to them. One example is online rituals of memorialization, from virtual cemeteries allowing people to commemorate pets or loved ones to web-based shrines that combine sacred and secular elements. This is exemplified in the rise of tribute sites and memorial rituals emerging after the death of Michael Jackson in 2009. From “Michael Mondays” on Twitter where fans weekly tweet memories about Jackson, to web sites such as [memories.michaeljackson.com](http://memories.michaeljackson.com), the internet provides a space for fans to create individual tributes and communally grieve. These spaces allow traditional death rituals to be combined with personalized interpretations of the afterlife in ways that can offer participants a transcendent experience (Bennett and Campbell forthcoming). The virtual becomes an otherworldly space in which to connect with the deceased or use religious or mystical discourse to present preferred memories or sympathetic renderings of celebrities (Sanderson and Cheong 2010). Thus the internet can encourage convergent practices by allowing individuals to come together and co-create activities and narratives that provide spiritual meaning for life events.

This flexibility of practice and tendency toward individualism online has also been noted within internet studies. Concern has been raised by some as to the potential implications this networked individualism may have on offline socialization and community practices (Campbell 2004). Indeed, Greg Armfield and Robert Holbert found that “individual-level religiosity is negatively associated with Internet use,” meaning that the internet users primarily interact at an individual rather than at a community level, which might possibly encourage a “secularism model” of engagement (2003: 139). The idea of convergent practice also surfaces in current work within the sociology of religion that argues that there



has been a shift in religious practice within Western society, moving from strict adherence to traditional forms of religiosity and institutions to more fluid affiliations with religious beliefs and values. Scholars have recognized that the public practice and understanding of religion has gone beyond simple adherence to a single religious tradition, institution, and affiliation. This religious assembling of religious meaning from multiple sources and contexts in a global society has been described by some scholars as syncretism, the mixing or overlapping of multiple traditions (Stewart and Shaw 1994; Leopold 2004), or hybridization, combining ideologies from different contexts such as belief with commodification and consumerism (Kitiarsa 2005; Beyer and Beaman 2007). Some scholars, however, would argue that this movement toward a *bricolage* religion is not new, that people have always mixed institutional religion with forms of popular piety, combining the sacred and the profane into personal forms of religious expression (McGuire 1997, 2006). What the internet does is make the practices of “pic-n-mix” religiosity mainstream, as the process of mixing multiple sources or forms of spiritual self-expression, once done by individuals in private or on the fringes, becomes more accessible and visible to the wider culture.

Convergent practice online echoes the autonomy of practice described by some scholars of religion as “lived religion,” requiring the close study of individual spiritual practices in terms of how they actually live out their religiosity on a daily basis (Hall 1997). Trends have also been noted toward “implicit religion,” which recognizes that seemingly secular practices may serve a religious role in people’s everyday life (Bailey 1990). This means traditional religious language and notions can be transposed upon actions and artifacts previously seen as nonreligious. The language and images of the sacred thus become definitional tools to redefine contemporary life (Ammerman 2006). Thus it is increasingly being recognized that within Western society, individuals perform religion in ways that draw from multiple sacred and secular spaces, rituals, and meanings in order to create their own hybrid spiritualities. This is echoed by research that suggests people are “more spiritual and less religious,” or less likely to affiliate with set religious institutions or forms of practice (Roof 1999, 2000). It can be argued that many individuals use media in ways that encourage and reinforce a sense of religious individualism. Together these developments demonstrate that the “pic-n-mix” culture enabled by religious practice online reflects larger cultural trends in the practice of religion. Convergent practice highlights that the internet offers a tool box of new possibilities for religious expression and connectedness that enhance individuals’

religious lifestyles and allow for the creation of new forms of hybridized religion.

### Multisite Reality

From this idea of convergent practice comes a growing recognition of the interconnection between online and offline contexts. While the internet does encourage creative appropriation and experimentation that can create a *bricolage* of religious practices, there is also evidence of strong ties between individuals' offline attitudes and behaviors and those they perform online. This demonstrates what can be described as a multisite reality, where practices in different contexts are simultaneously connected and mediated. This means people can live out their lives online through Facebook, blogs, and participation in online groups while also engaging in an embodied life offline that may or may not draw from those experiences. Connected to the idea of a multisite reality is that the online world is consciously and unconsciously imprinted by its users with the values, structures, and expectations of the offline world. Multisite reality means online practices are often informed by offline ways of being, as users integrate or seek to connect their online and offline patterns of life. It also means that there is often ideological overlap and interaction between online religious groups and forums and their corresponding offline religious institutions. As religious actors deal with questions of how the internet shapes sacred conceptions of time, space, and identity, we see an interactive flow between traditional sources and structures of knowledge and their online counterparts. Thus the internet becomes a conversational space allowing for interaction and negotiations between traditional and new sources and interpretations of religious belief.

Research in the past decade has frequently identified the multisite nature of internet activity and meaning, as the online is shown to be closely connected and influenced by various aspects of the offline context. This is seen in several of the discussions above—for example, in studies of online religious community which argue that participation is supplemental rather than a substitution for offline religious engagement (Young 2004; Campbell 2005a). Online religious practice thus can be seen as an extension of, and a connection to, offline religiosity. This is further emphasized by Helland's work (2007) demonstrating that members of Hindu and Buddhist religious traditions actively utilized the internet in order to develop network connections between their diaspora communities, their places of origins, and sacred sites. The internet is also utilized for the creation of spaces that link the offline and online, allowing, for instance, immigrants in geographically dispersed

contexts to connect with each other and their sacred homelands or to establish safe, supportive, and religiously tolerant environments online (Cheong and Poon 2009). Online religious practice is often closely intertwined with rather than divorced from traditional religious constructs and conceptions. For many, offline space and architecture serve as a template informing the design and functions of online ritual spaces and structures (Jacobs 2007; Jenkins 2008). In many respects, offline religion serves as a source book for aspects of religious practice online, and so offline religious traditions suggest a particular trajectory for how online practitioners might see and utilize the internet (Campbell 2005b; Martinez-Zárate et al. 2008). This is because the diffuse and boundless nature of the internet means people often revert to historic and established narratives for a sense of orientation in order to make sense of, tame, and mark off the internet as sacred space. Online use is therefore influenced by individuals' and groups' offline narratives of religious belief and practice. Religious groups draw on their history, tradition, and core beliefs as markers for their decision-making regarding technology and thus they also guide their choices related to how and why they will use and frame the internet (Campbell 2010a). Yet because the internet also offers the possibility to alter traditional religious practices as they are imported online, the result is that religious engagement online can both enhance and complicate one's offline religious engagement (Robinson-Neal 2008). So this interconnection means the boundaries between online and offline realities can become blurred, causing challenges for static offline institutions seeking to maintain control over their online counterparts (Barker 2005).

The concept of multisite reality also suggests that media technologies and the worlds they create intersect with individual notions of reality. Mass and digital media provide resources for interpreting the world, which can inform individuals' worldviews. This echoes research that has found media technologies and messages intersect with and influence individuals' practice and conception of religious life. For example, just as active membership in traditional religious organizations has been shown to fulfill important social needs for its members, Katelyn McKenna and Kelly West (2005) found in their study of the internet's influence on individuals' spiritual lives that participants in online religious forums reported experiencing similar shared personal and social benefits as those in offline local religious institutions. Research has also shown that internet-based religious practice is connected to an individuals' overall expression of religiosity, serving as an extension of their conventional religious practice and spiritual meaning-making (Hoover and Park 2005). Such work addresses the fact that the

internet, like many other forms of mass media, acts as “symbolic or meaning resources” used by spiritual seekers in contemporary society in religious orientation and formation practices (Hoover et al. 2004; Hoover 2006). This movement between media worlds and the public sphere means it can be difficult to separate or distinguish which sources most influence an individual’s spirituality, as people draw simultaneously from online and offline contexts for their religious identities. The Pew American Internet Life project found that an increasing number of “religion seekers” use the internet to supplement their religious life practices (Hoover et al. 2004).

One illustration of how the internet represents a multisite reality is in the way religious activities online are commonly informed by the beliefs or identity of a larger religious tradition or community. This means members of a religious group online are frequently guided by the motivations or mission of the wider group to which they belong; thus, offline meta-narratives and goals inform what they see as the purpose of the internet or how they justify their engagement with it. For instance, Christian Evangelicals, who have had a long history of appropriating various media for proselytizing activities, from the printing press to televangelism, were some of the first religious internet users to see the technology through a distinctive lens. In the 1990s, many Evangelicals embraced the internet as a tool for making disciples by creating numerous books, online resources, and even organizations to help advocate and facilitate this central goal. Initiatives such as The Internet Evangelism Coalition (<http://www.webevangelism.com>), offering an online training course for would-be internet evangelists, and “Internet Evangelism Day” (<http://www.internetevangelismday.com>) emerged, supported by recognized organizations like the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and the National Association of Evangelicals, seeking to encourage Christians to embrace the internet as a tool to spread the Christian message (Campbell forthcoming). Employing recognized rhetorical strategies with theological justifications, they framed the internet in prescriptive terms, arguing that the internet had been divinely created in order to help fulfill their evangelical calling and Christian obligation (Campbell 2010a). Such arguments helped this group justify not only their use of the internet, but validated their wider mission and identity as Evangelicals. Here, recognized offline patterns of religious life and belief directly frame and contextualize life online. This expression of multisite reality encourages the view that the online is an extension of the offline religious social world; thus the internet should be infused with similar motivations and practices.

Digital media may be used to maintain and extend existing relationships with their offline religious communities. For many, media technologies and the spaces they create serve as key resources for constructing their spiritual lives in ways that create rhythms that are highly integrated and even interdependent. It also means that the practice of religion may involve an invisible or seamless flow between these media spaces, offering spiritual seekers the tools for assembling their religious lives, a sort of online–offline experience of religious hybridity. Multisite reality highlights the fact that there are strong ties between individuals' online and offline attitudes, behaviors, and practices. Online routines are often informed by offline ways of being, and involve a free flow of ideas and practice between these different spheres of reality construction.

### NETWORKED RELIGION AS AN INTERPRETIVE TOOL

As argued above, these five traits point to a conception of religion. Networked religion presents religious practice and culture online in terms of a network approach where relationships, identities, and realities are shaped through loosely bounded affiliations established by individual user preferences and connection over traditionally tightly bounded relations established through hierarchies. *Networked community* suggests communities function as loose social networks with varying levels of religious affiliation and commitment. This transforms notions of membership in fixed, geographically bound community to highlight the fact that people live simultaneously in multiple social networks that are emergent, varying in depth, fluid, and highly personalized. *Storied identity* offers an understanding of the religious self that is malleable rather than fixed, yet unified through connecting to a select narrative. Individuals are able to assemble and perform their identity online in new ways through digital resources that are also used to connect this identity to a common group or experience to solidify meaning. This reflects changing perceptions of the nature of the self within wider society. *Shifting authority* notes that there is a shift occurring within traditional religious power structures through the institution of new gatekeepers and authority roles and structures online. This means authority within a networked structure creates challenges between new and old authorities, as offline leaders seek to solidify their position and control in the face of newly empowered sources, raising issues of legitimacy, authenticity, and status within the social sphere. *Convergent practice* outlines the blending of religious rituals and information from multiple sources in ways that build a self-directed form of spiritual

engagement online. Here networked interaction creates new possibilities for highly individualized and hybridized traditional-innovative forms of practice and modes of knowing. *Multisite reality* suggests that the online world is consciously and unconsciously imprinted by users' offline values; so online ways of being are informed by patterns of life offline. This means that there is a strong interconnection and potential movement between online and offline contexts, expectation, and behaviors. This ideological overlap guides individuals' network interactions.

It is important to note that these traits of religious practice online are also found within wider Western religious culture. The loosening of traditional boundaries and affiliations noted within networked religion does not simply highlight how people perform and perceive religion online and offline. This article argues that these shifts are also at work in our emerging information culture, as the internet serves as a microcosm displaying popular notions of being and sociality. I argue that in light of this, the internet serves as a mirror to highlight social shifts occurring in the public understanding of social practice at many different levels, the performance of religion being just one of these. Thus these five characteristics can be seen as markers describing the current social milieu surrounding much of Western religious culture. By observing how traditional beliefs and relationships are re-negotiated by individuals online, we see networked religion illustrate just one arena in which the trends of being in a networked society are impacting simply another facet of contemporary society.

In some respects, certain characteristics of networked religion are not new, such as the drawing from multiple sources to create convergent religious practices or living out a storied identity. It can be argued that the internet is simply another resource people take on board in the ongoing process of negotiating the tension between the individual and the group, the expectations of the tradition, and benefits associated with personal preferences and freedoms. In this respect, religion has always been a negotiated practice. Hybridization has occurred across history within all religions when new means of information production or sources of social interaction emerged, from the rise of trade routes to various media, forcing religions to negotiate traditional protocols, activities, and relations. Indeed, some religions themselves are highly networked, such as Catholicism in its historical adaptation of its practices in its missionary endeavors, as clergy had to adapt and move between institutional and new contexts in their work.

Yet rather than discount the notion of networked religion, this history offers support to the idea that religion functions as a fluid-adapting network, and that the internet highlights and heightens

particular aspects of this networking. The characteristics of networked religion explored here highlight how the internet facilitates the ongoing processes of negotiation and change that characterize the practice of religion. They also place a spotlight on key aspects of the current negotiation within a global networked society. The theoretical concept of networked religion, besides speaking to the form of spirituality that emerges out of online networked negotiations with traditional religion, shows how current religious narratives, practices, and structures are able to become increasingly flexible, transitional, and transnational as they are lived out both online and in an information- and technology-driven society. It helps explain the ways in which networked society creates new borderlands of interactions between the online and offline worlds, between the digital and embodied. In this way, studying life online, through the lens of networked religion, becomes a tool for understanding changes occurring within our increasingly global and complex offline world.

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