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Thou meets online

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Ever since William Gibson came up with the term in Neuromancer, we have heard endless sociological definitions of cyberspace: the global village, the shopping mall, the library, the time-sink, you name it. We were told in the 90s that it would transform the world, us and our interactions. That it will be the panacea to such evils as illiteracy, elitism in education, global poverty, loneliness and depression. It was variably touted as the place where privacy will rule and where it was lost. It belonged to conservative middle class white males, or to the cyberpunks and anarchists, it teemed with criminal elements and business opportunities, it was grand for our children's learning skills and it was dangerous for them because of all the lurking undesirable elements.

In 1998, the cyberspace became the abode of the Almighty.

And that is not some sort of metaphor. In her 1998 book, Jennifer Cobb, a software consultant and a theologian, called cyberspace precisely that. Using the Jesuit paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin's theories, in which he predicted emergence of cyberspace based on his studies of evolution, Cobb decries the unbridgeable schism that has separated the world of the spirit and that of the machine, and stresses a few interesting similarities between computers and machines. Referring to the way Deep Blue beat Kasparov at chess, Cobb states that there was an act of creativity involved in Deep Blue's calculations and that this act was precisely what destroyed Kasparov's ability to continue playing. '[A]s technical systems become more complex – with simple, predictable mechanisms coalescing into hierarchies of increasing organization – something elegant, inspired, and absolutely unpredictable simply and suddenly "emerges." Many observers today see this as the "hand of God".' 'If the Internet is ubiquitous, and God is in the Internet, then there are powerful implications for the mystics in us' (Reese 2003).

So much for philosophy. A social phenomenon without a practical base is mere speculation. If cyberspace is the Almighty's abode, then what are his followers doing in the Information Age? Well, they are in full force, breaking speed limits on the Infobahn. The faithful from various religions, cults, sects and groups embraced cyberspace early; by 1997 Zaleski was telling in his book of Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu Web sites, of finding plenty of folks eager to discuss the sacred on the Net, of a Catholic bishop who fell out of the Vatican's good books only to strike back by spreading his message through the Internet, of techno-pagans conducting a cyber-ritual to welcome the pagan god into cyberspace, and Buddhists seeking enlightenment in electronic *sanghas*. Sacred and profane, orthodox and heretical, authority and parody, all can be found bumping together as geographical and other historical boundaries are weakened.

In 1997, cyberspace was a young, budding creation. Ten years later, religion and its followers are doing exceedingly well. Courses on theology are provided online by major universities, discussion boards and Web logs abound, scholarly journals are becoming e-journals, articles proliferate and the rapid development of multimedia allows the faithful to

listen to sermons and hymns from the comfort of their laptops. Every day, over three thousand people log onto the Internet in search of religion-related information in the USA alone. A December 2001 study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that fully one-quarter of adult American Internet users had accessed the Net for religious purposes – about half to acquire information on religion and a minority to interact with others about religion or spirituality. That is a higher portion than for banking, trading stocks, or gambling. Cyberspace makes possible new forms and expressions of spirituality – from Web pages to e-mail lists to Usenet newsgroups to multi-user chat rooms and beyond. Some are authorized by specific religious groups; most are anything but official.

Doubts arise, of course, whether this disembodiment of religion is good for community: outreach to remote areas and hostile audiences may have increased, but any Sunday in Australia starkly shows empty pews in churches. Interestingly, books on religion and religions are multiplying. Although not exactly the variety a practicing person would read for spiritual sustenance, these publications are becoming increasingly more in-depth, more critical and open vistas onto the 'other' in an unprecedented way. I remember 20 years ago when I was a young intellectual with insatiable curiosity about other people's faith and how difficult it was to find anything in bookshops that was not confirmatory to the then current state of belief. Today's public library, in comparison, sports an endless variety of books on such subjects as neo-paganism, the history of Celtic religions, historical analysis of the sacred texts, gay theology, the role of feminism in various religions, psychology of religion and what not.

This wealth of material is being reflected online. In addition, the Internet benefits the faithful in many more ways. It forces them to re-examine who they are *vis-à-vis* the other groups. It can become a place for interfaith contact and ecumenical work, although all this contact with like-minded people is only good as long as it does not foster exclusionism and failure of dialogue. It can be used for virtual conferencing intra-denominationally, and proceedings can be uploaded online for those who could not attend. It also permits groups with similar interests within a denomination to meet online, network and collaborate on projects. Keene (1999) points to the remarkable diversity of the Internet as another positive aspect in religion's move online. The Internet displays a great diversity of faiths and styles, but many of the Web pages dedicated to religions sacrifice depth for width, possibly because it takes time to get into the depth of spiritual understanding, while the Infobahn is all about getting it fast, like some half-cooked two-minute noodles of theology. Last, but not least, comes cyberspace's ability to bypass traditional 'centers of power' and empowering the grassroots. It can be even used to wage an electronic Jihad and issue religious rulings (*fatwas*) to followers, as Bunt (2003) aptly explains in his fascinating book.

With all this wealth of information and social activity occurring in the religious sphere of cyberspace, a need arises for better organization of resources, and introducing the general public to all its riches and wonders. A recent book, *Religion online: finding faith on the Internet*, edited by Lorne L. Dawson (2004) of the University of Waterloo, who specializes in new cults and religious movements, and Douglas E. Cowan of the University of Missouri-Kansas City, an assistant professor of religious studies and sociology, provides an accessible and comprehensive introduction to this burgeoning new religious reality, from cyber-pilgrimages to modern pagan chat-room communities. *Give me that online religion* (Brasher 2004), on the other hand, draws examples from the Web showing how people use the Internet for religious purposes and predicts what will happen to religion as a result of the emerging global network of computers that form the Internet. Brasher believes that every new technology causes cultural shifts. Ever since writing and parchment first transformed oral cultures, technologies have shaped the way humans have expressed their faith.

Librarians and information managers working in the field of religious studies are also

publishing in the field. Stover's (2001) book *Theological librarians and the Internet: implication for practice* published originally as a double issue of the *Journal of religious and theological information*, explores and discusses the effects of new technology on theological libraries and librarians. It is designed to assist theological librarians, instructors, researchers and others in making sense of the vast amounts of religious and theological information available today on the Internet. Beginning with a thorough discussion of information technology and theological libraries, the book compares and contrasts the state of the field in 1990 with the situation that theological librarians face today. It follows the historical analysis with a description of how theological libraries are beginning to utilize Web catalogs to improve access to their unique collections and how the major gateways to these catalogs can be accessed. Probably the only book of its type, it is seldom quoted (except when sold, and that often happens to be among books on software and hacking). Its 13 chapters cover almost everything a theological librarian needs to know: from Web catalogues to e-journals, distance education, useful Web sites, accessing digital images and designing effective and appropriate Web sites.

Religion is alive and well in cyberspace, but it is not the same old religion. The imaginary geography of cyberspace transforms the character of faith. For traditional faiths, the Internet is as much challenge as opportunity. It would be fascinating to watch how it evolves, for 'God works in mysterious ways' – and that does not preclude online.

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