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New Thoughts on the Status of the Religious Cyborg

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In 1996, Brasher's article, "Thoughts on the status of the spiritual Cyborg" was published, calling readers to consider Internet users as an emerging class of human beings, who demanded new communication values, stories and language from the evangelists, religious teachers and counsellors. Fourteen years on, the Internet has changed. For many in the West, it pervades almost every part of social living, from national politics through education to parenting. The speed of the Internet has increased manifold, allowing people to access large media files and streams of data so quickly that online media dominates the market of popular culture goods, surpassing the sale of newspapers, CDs, DVDs and soon radio and television. Access to online information is available everywhere, at home, school, the library, the airport, the coffee shop, phone booths, fridges and in your pocket. Indeed, mobile technologies have

allowed users to capture images and sound, create text, and upload them instantly. The effect is that, at newsworthy events, media companies may not just compete with one another for coverage and delivery, but also with lay spectators and participants.

This article suggests some implications of this development for the study of online religion. Drawing from a survey of literature from the fields of religious sociology and studies into the religious construction of both Internet and user, this paper outlines how the Cyborg has served as a metaphor for the study of online religion, and how that metaphor has been shaped in line with the aims and pursuits of researchers. The arrival of Web 2.0, however, calls us to rethink the relationship between technology and user, and hence new questions must be asked by researchers. This paper suggests what these questions may be.

Religious Construction of the Internet and the Cyborg

Wertheim's book, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*, is an introduction to the debate about the religious construction of the Internet, in its consideration of the Internet as a socially built, technological expression of religious dreams, desires and fears. When modern secular thought devalued ideas of a "heavenly realm" that intersects and inspires life in the material, physical reality, the construction of the Internet as a "cyber-space" has offered an alternative.

With this new digital space we have located an unexpected escape hatch from the physicalist dogma – for cyberspace too exists beyond physical space. Although it is true that cyberspace is realized through the by-products of physical science [...] nonetheless, cyberspace itself is not located within the physicalist worldpicture. It is a fundamentally new kind of space that is not encompassed by any physics equations. As the complexity theorists would say, cyberspace is an emergent phenomena whose properties transcend the sum of its component parts. Like the

medieval Empyrean, cyberspace is a “place” outside the physical space. (1999: 41)

Brasher continues the discussion in *Give Me That Online Religion*. For Brasher, our culture has embraced Cyberspace as the culmination of widely held values and beliefs, and has therefore placed in it many of the myths that permeate the stories and rituals practised in society. If we consider the Internet as a space, then it lacks consistent cultural borders and markers of physical space. Therefore the terrain of Cyberspace is contoured by the creativity and imagination of those who reside in it (2001: 8-9). The role of religion online is then to offer such markers that point to the spiritual nature and potential of life in this new realm. “Like mounting a mezuzah on the doorpost or a crucifix in the living room of a new abode, online religion classifies Cyberspace as a valued and value-producing home” (2001: 142).

The research of religion online may therefore be conceived as researching the religion of the Cyborg, as one who resides in Cyberspace. The term Cyborg has offered us a metaphor for considering both how technology shapes our humanness and how we add humanity to the machinery around us. And, in particular to this research, it can be a metaphor for how we are religious with, in and on the Internet, and how we wrap religious ideas and ideals around the technology. For while some may think of a Cyborg as one whose limbs or insides are part machine, others ask “Are you not a Cyborg the moment your hand is on your mouse?”

Movies and television shows such as *AI, Johnny Mnemonic, The Bionic Woman, Metropolis, The Animatrix, the Terminator series, and even Inspector Gadget* offer us glimpses of the possible futures: either where machines become human, or where parts of our original humanity is replaced or enhanced by machines. Even the *Alien* series of films, which is primarily about biological monsters, contains a subplot beginning with an android whose amoral loyalty to government leads him to betray the protagonist, and ending with an android whose “programming” leads her to betray her creators in order to save the protagonist. Our journalists promote the notion that life imitates art in their retelling of stories of people who replace artificial eyes with video cameras, prosthetic fingers with USB flash drives, and the

instalment of bionic devices to not just overcome disability, but enhance performance. We have painted our popular culture with images of victorious humans who have used technology to conquer the human condition and of a further fallen humanity at the mercy of machines around and inside them.

For Erik Davis, author of *TechGnosis*, the Cyborgs created in these stories are not just science fiction versions of gods and monsters. They are also heroes and villains, “narrative figures who are helping us to thicken the plots we are weaving with very real, and very spunky, technologies” (1998: 189). We add story, values, beliefs around technology because that is what humans do to all things: we add meaning to things in order to know what to do with and around them. Our stories around machines are rich because we are aware of how much we have achieved alongside them, and how much we don’t yet know we can do with them. Indeed, the popularity of Tamagotchis in the previous decade was not just because children wanted to play pet-owner with a primitive picture of an AI animal (prompting so much moral panic about the future of owning and loving a flesh-and-bone pet), but because children know their future will be surrounded by machines with whom they will relate on not just practical levels, but emotional ones too, seeing how their parents “love and hate” their computers, televisions and mobile phones.

The history of Internet technology is laden with values, to the extent we may say that the Internet is socially constructed, and there is a religious element to this too. From its birth in military laboratories, through its release to academic institutions and hacker students, to its introduction to the general market, the Internet has carried tags of freedom, intimacy, democracy, secrecy, isolation and domination. These values guide our approach to the technology and our relationships to others through it. Religious constructions include the notion that Cyberspace is a realm outside the material world, free from material constraints of time, space and power, and the potential for a more just society and fuller existence. Religion can also label the Internet as a demonising and diabolical force, tempting people away from real relationships and stable communities.

These values are also formed in the context of production and consumption of all technologies, in a period where the more advanced the device, the more “like us” it is made and sold. Computers become

personal computers become desktops, that we use by opening windows and clicking images, navigating it in the way we would a house, getting to know it as if it were another person. The mobile phone becomes the personal digital assistant, that we carry around not just in case somebody wants to talk with us, but because at times we may need to talk with it. Moreover, talking semiotically, we “write” on these devices, by customising desktop interfaces, adding pictures and wallpapers, making ringtones out of our favourite pop tracks, in order to make them ours. Machines are not just tools at our disposal but are culturally produced markers by which we construct our patterns of daily living, our relationships and our identities. We are Cyborg because we make machines like us in order to use them in the making of ourselves.

Yet while the “humanising” of technology is evident in the development of the Cyborg story, there is another side to it: the “machination” of the human person in modern biology, epistemology and sociology. The discovery of the chromosome prompted us to wonder how much of our impulses are guided by chemical software, and that the ultimate purpose of our existence is to maintain and recreate storage units for the information. Theorising the mind has also evolved into computing language, where memory is a network of neural pathways, and knowledge is a pattern of connecting between the outside world, our senses and the network. The poststructuralist sees human society as built by networks of power that enchant and control the individual into viewing the world, and his or her place in it, in a certain myopic way that is so overwhelming that it defines an individual's identity and purpose. Knowledge is intertwined with ideology, designed and communicated not just to enable a person's comprehension of the outside world, but to confine him or her to a particular role in that world. Atheism, while seen by the religious as an attack on the truth of revelation, is more an attack on the religious institutions which have become part of the great oppressive ideological machine by which we have been “programmed.”

In the apparent loss of the human soul in late modernity, long gone from the age of magic and mysticism, the Cyborg has looked to technology to rediscover its humanity. Erik Davis (in the same book) tells us that technology has helped the Cyborg rise to a sense of meaning and renewal in recent history, by explaining the philosophies and stories of Gurdjieff's “machine-man” and L Ron Hubbard's “computer-mind.” and mentioning that while members of the counterculture revolution of the 1960s rejected new

technologies as a form of abuse and imprisonment, lauded the invention of synthetic drugs like LSD to bring them to new states of awareness (Davis, 1998: 143-46, see also Gunkel, 2007).

And to the Internet, a machine, but laden with possibilities and magic and mysticism, the new Cyborg sees an opportunity to find a new heaven and a new earth, free from the machinations of the body and material society. This author considers the religious Cyborg as one who resides on the margins of two types of space – one “virtual” and the other “actual” – in their construction of religious identity, involving negotiation of religious text, authority, and experience with others in both types of space. The project of such construction also involves the discursive negotiation of “virtual” and “actual” through the use of technology, the imposition of values on the technology and the beliefs and behaviours considered in interaction with other users. This article now turns to an examination of the shape of this metaphor through a survey of research into religion online.

Cyborg as Extension of Self

This first impression of the Cyborg sees the computer, like other electronic media, as extensions of the senses. Web sites become destinations that we “arrive at” when we type in URLs or click hyperlinks. First projects of research into religion online, what Højsgaard and Warburg (2005) considered “the first wave” of research in the field, seemed primarily concerned with questions of such journeys and destinations. These pieces of fact-finding endeavoured to answer:

- What does online religion look like?
- What can people do online and why would they do it?
- What kind of people go online for religion and why? (2005: 1-11)

In 2004, Hoover, Clark and Rainie published a report for the Pew Internet and American Life series based on a widespread and in-depth study of American Internet users. They asked simple questions of their sample, including “Do you go to the Internet for religious purposes?” They found that most users

of religious Internet sites were active participants in religious activities offline, and that Internet use was to enhance religious activity in other parts of their lives.

Two years earlier, Helland's article in the journal *Religion* suggested that "religion online" and "online religion" are two distinct phenomena - one being the online impression of an online community, structure, or practice, and the other a religion whose beginnings, and perhaps entire being, is on the Internet. So while many use the Internet solely as a source of information to affect offline religious life, there are some of us for whom the Internet is an exhaustively valid place to ask spiritual questions or seek moral guidance.

In the same journal issue, Karaflogka presented her study on how religious language is translated on web sites, using the home pages of various Muslim groups on the Internet. Here she showed how organisations present themselves to an online world. Arthur gave us a look into how nature religion can manifest online, and MacWilliams considered how certain religious practices, such as pilgrimages, can be taken from topography to technology.

This "first wave" of research into online religion sought to uncover the phenomenon of religious practice on the Internet, as an evolutionary step of a differently technologized society. It did focus on how religious life online compares to offline religion, and even evaluated its merits and pitfalls against what we knew about religious life in the "real world". In doing so, however, it tended, mostly, to start with preconceived understandings of "what religious practice" was, evident in its methodologies. What was considered a religious web site, or what could be seen as a purely religious practice, was based on their similarities with what we saw in mosques and coven gatherings and dangling from car rear-view mirrors.

Højsgaard and Warburg believe, as do I, that while talk of "waves" of research into online religion implies some chronological development, it is perhaps better to see them as shifts in focus which have generally occurred over time, but not universally. Some research products fit into different "waves" at different times, based on different circumstances, and different universities, research traditions and countries.

Indeed, a few years would pass since the aforementioned works before the first extensive study of religion in the blogosphere was published. From a sample of two hundred Christian blogs and interviews with 49 authors, Cheong, Halavais and Kwon (2008) used both quantitative and qualitative measures to analyse religious content online, motivations for blogging, and links between religious blogs and other online information. The following claims were made:

1. That some users find the act of blogging a part of their regular religious practice, as a response to religious experiences recognised in daily living.
2. That bloggers linked to such a number of external sites that have little or no religious content, that the researchers could say bloggers did not limit their exposure to only religious content.
3. That blogs are a vehicle for mission to readers, through the promotion of Christian responses to world events and issues, and the engagement of readers in conversation about participation in society as religious people.
4. That blogging has a function for entertainment and escapism.

The authors conclude that the blogosphere provides for the faithful an environment where the religious and the secular are explored, expressed and debated equally and freely, where other social environments may be perceived to favour one over the other. In the blogosphere, claim the authors, the profane and sacred spheres merge.

Adopting a uses and gratifications approach to the sample, the research did not extend beyond an analysis of the relationship between the technology and the primary user, appearing to take an atomistic approach to analysis of blog content and bloggers' interaction with the technology. Indeed it lacks study of interaction between bloggers and their readership. The authors make note of this exclusion, prompting future research to

expand the investigation by delving into more posts that constitute blog texts within a religious tradition and investigate the links of individual blog posts. As blogs offer an alternative in religious self-expression, future research could

investigate the implications of critical communicative shifts on traditional religious norms, including governing sanctions and concepts of religious authority and leadership (127).

Like Cheong, Halavais and Kwon's work, studies of religion online in the first "wave" tended to approach their data as content to be considered as composed and consumed by individual users. The next "wave" would approach the Internet as sites for, through interaction between users, the creation, modification and reinforcement of religious norms, practices and structures.

Cyborg as Status

Rather than considering the Cyborg as one who extends oneself online, Brasher calls her readers to think of Cyborgs differently:

Like vassal lord, citizen, and proletariat before it, the cyborg paints humanness in a historical context. It discloses how the organization of contemporary social and political life is working in consort with the reigning means of production to influence the range of humanness possible in our era. (1996: 814)

If the introduction of a new technology has the power to change the social order, then those for whom electronic communications technology is an accessible mode of communication may be a particular class of people, whose language, values and access to resources and even worldviews may differ from those to whom such technologies are alien. For Brasher, the Cyborg is a metaphor not for how humans reach information online, but for how they interact, both online with each other and offline with other Cyborgs and non-Cyborgs alike.

This new metaphor sits as a useful label for describing what Højsgaard and Warburg identified as the "second wave" of research into religion online. In this wave researchers interested themselves more in the nature of religious practice online. It included rites of passage, ritual and the placement of authority in

online Wiccan groups (see Helland, 2005), identity formation among adolescents (see Lövheim, 2005; Lövheim and Linderman, 2005), the establishment of trust in email groups (see Campbell, 2005). It also included discursive constructions of the technology itself, within religious communities and structures of power (see Campbell, 2005; Dawson, 2005; O'Leary, 2005).

The “third wave,” whose passing was heralded by Højsgaard and Warburg but not yet complete, was to be what can be researched about the impact of Cyborg religion on religion in the offline world. It would include comparisons of structures of authority and knowledge between online and offline groups, such as the study of Barker (2005) on cult groupings, and of Campbell (2007) on how religious authority is asserted in online conversations about religion. Cross-cultural perspectives are also noted here, highlighted with emphasis by the *Journal of CMC* (12:3), and in Lily Kong’s (2001) deliberations on a geography of virtual sacred space.

These new “waves” took a detour from quantitative approaches to online religion - counting sites, users, demographics, to consider ethnographic pursuits and sociological ponderings about the humans who were doing the religion in this world. Yet as the first wave showed a presumption about what is religious, these sets of work tend to make presumptions about the Internet, specifically, as a realm of being religious that is discrete and separate from the world outside.

Cyborg as Internet Impression

Increasing access to high-speed Internet connections in the developed world, prolific use of mobile media devices, and the popularity of Web 2.0 applications have changed the nature of being online. Firstly, we are aware that being online is no longer a discrete step. For many who have enjoyed Internet access for years, and for those who have made it to adulthood without knowing life before the Web, Cyberspace need not be a place we need to make time or room for, but is something constantly within reach. As Pang suggests (quoted in Thomas, 2006):

Why is cyberspace coming to an end? Our experience of interacting with digital information is changing. We're moving to a world in which we (or objects acting on our behalf) are online all the time, everywhere. Designers and computer scientists are also trying hard to create a new generation of devices and interfaces that don't monopolize our attention, but ride on the edges of our awareness. We'll no longer have to choose between cyberspace and the world; we'll constantly access the first while being fully part of the second. Because of this, the idea of cyberspace as separate from the real world will collapse.

Secondly, as blogs and social networking sites present our daily lives to friends, file sharing networks allow us to add our impressions to already published media, and aggregator programs both bring the Web to us, and share our favourite bits of the Web for others to see, the Internet is collecting and shaping an impression of ourselves, and presenting a façade of its users to the world. Thomas (2006) says it plainly:

[...] every time we use eBay or write a Gmail, we make a trade-off between body, technology and nature by allowing our data to become part of that organization's knowledge base.

In Web 2.0, producer and audience are blurred with the text and the medium. I am Cyborg, not just because I look at the Internet and see the world, but because the world looks at the Internet and sees me. These two phenomena present a challenge to reform our concept of Cyborg and present new questions for researching being religious online, perhaps calling for a “fourth wave” of research into religion on the Internet.

Rethinking “Real” and “Virtual” – A Religious Example

If the ubiquity of the Internet in everyday living leads us to believe that nobody “goes” online anymore, then the distinctions between the virtual and the real, or actual, as worlds or social environments, requires revaluation. I will use my limited knowledge of the religion Islam as point of comparison.

We who only ever get superficial glimpses of the holy city of Mecca, in stories and pictures that flood Western media to either glamorise or demonise, but always make alien and unknowable, could describe Mecca as a virtual reality. Engaging all senses in ritual and spectacle, entrants lose themselves in the mass, immersed in a spirit of communion. Yet while many abide there, few reside there. It is a city out of time, both eternal and momentary, like a quantum place. Politics and commerce cram themselves into its doorways, and sometimes creep in, but are always thwarted. Even the temporal self is relinquished. Individuals shed themselves of the clothes and adornments of ordinary life, so that there are no wives or pop-stars, kings or doctors. They let the place write on them with white linen, rubbing out their everyday identity.

However for many Muslims, the converse is true. Mecca is not the virtual reality; Earth is. In Mosques as in homes and offices at designated prayer moments, Muslims turn their bodies in Mecca’s direction, and turn their bodies into nodes in the network of Islam. For Muslims, daily living is but an emanation, a projected image, of the true life that is found far away in space and time. The Hajj, a pillar of Islam and a directive for all in the faith, means pilgrimage. It is notable that Muslims are asked that, at least once in their lives, to not be in Mecca, but go there. While the experience of being in the holy city may transform the individual, what is important for the faith is the leaving their home and returning, so that the world may be transformed.

I hope not to be so arrogant and simple as to say that Cyberspace is to the spiritual Cyborg as Mecca is to the Muslim. I will say that both Cyborgs and Muslims have something to teach us about our virtual/actual dichotomy. If the Cyborg identifies her/his situation as on the edge of both real world and

online community life, then neither are complete. The spirituality of the Cyborg is not named by their residence in Cyberspace, but in the pilgrimage to and from it, in an endeavour to both be transformed and reform the communities and relationships in daily living.

New Questions for “the Fourth Wave”

I intend to contribute to the next step in the progression of research into online religion. This “fourth wave” will keep quieter on questions like “Where is the religious Internet and what will it do for me?”, “What can we do online that we can’t do offline and vice versa?” and “What will happen to me when I go online, who will I meet and what will I become?”. Rather, questions will be more like “What is religious about the Internet that I create, gather, rear, mould and cultivate?”. Presumptions existent in previous waves of research may be overcome.

For example, Johns’ (2008) study of religious affiliation and identity among Facebook users showed that Facebook groups with overt religious titles had generally minimal activity. Users who would join these groups would offer little to the group beyond their membership. Johns suggests that in Facebook, users “wave a hello” to religion. What Johns could not study, because he was not “friends with” every Facebook user in the groups he studied, was that it is likely that any of the groups’ users would have the group advertised (sometimes prominently) on the users profile page. So while the user would not be active within the group, the group’s existence sends a message to all who seek the user in the networking site. The user has allowed a link to the group to speak for him/her. The link speaks of the user’s religious identity. We see him/her through that group’s page. Yet if the question were posed to these users, “How do you do religion online?”, it cannot be determined whether they would say they do religion online at all, even though they may claim to be religious in everyday life.

Another example can be found again in Facebook, and in particular to Facebook user profiles being created posthumously (Kavulla, 2007). Also known as tomb pages, these profile pages offer a space to remember lost friends. Religious activity may be evident in these sites, in the posts and conversations

of visitors, in the publications of prayers and blessings, or tagging images of candles and beads. However if Hoover, Clark and Rainie's (2004) question "Do you go to the Internet for religious purposes?" was asked to these users, the answer may be a resounding negative.

Presumptions about what makes an online practice a religious one, and what makes a religious practice an online one, may be overcome in this fourth wave, as the research tradition experiences a new shift of focus. Lövheim (2008) recognises it well, calling researchers like this one to reconsider the "purpose and the social contexts of interaction with religion online". Firstly, we must ask less about users' "relation to religious communities on the Internet", as if online religious communities can tell us all we need to know about online religion. Instead we must consider how religion is a component of the wider "social contexts organized through and in connection to new media". Secondly, we must ask less about Internet as a place where religion is done in peculiar, unique or traditional ways, and more about how the Internet is one "context for negotiations of the place and value of religion in the wider society and culture."

Conclusion

This article has introduced the concept of the religious Cyborg as an object of investigation for researchers of religion on the Internet. Drawing on Højsgaard and Warburg's consideration of the three waves of such research, I have suggested the Cyborg has a metaphor that guides questions asked and methods used by researchers in the field. Given that in recent years Internet usage has developed to the extent that, firstly, being online is no longer a discrete step, and, secondly, the distinction between producer, consumer and text is blurred in the medium, the concept of Cyborg has taken on new properties.

The Cyborg should not be seen as someone who goes online to connect with the world. On the other hand, they present themselves to the world by their shaping of the Internet. Furthermore, the Cyborg is not one who resides in the virtual world, but as one who travels between the virtual and the actual, to the extent that these terms themselves are negotiated.

New questions need be considered for those approaching research into religion online. They involve considering the Internet as a context for the evaluation and recreation of institutional and everyday religion both online and offline, and the study of how people shape, cultivate and recreate the technology itself into a religious artefact, and in doing so, shape our understandings of religious life for today's Cyborgs.¹

¹ Parts of this article appeared previously on the author's research blog, named *fishers, surfers and casters*. The blog can be found at <http://teusner.org/>.

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