DIGITAL RELIGION
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Based on papers read at the conference arranged
by the Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History,
Åbo Akademi University, Åbo/Turku, Finland, on 13–15 June 2012

Edited by
Tore Ahlbäck

Editorial Assistant
Björn Dahla

Published by the Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History
Åbo/Turku, Finland

Distributed by BTJ Finland
Editorial note

The theme for our symposium 2012 was ‘Digital religion’ and in our call for papers we described it in the following way: ‘“Digital Religion’ aims to explore the complex relationship between religion and digital technologies of communication. Digital religion encompasses a myriad of connections and the goal of the conference is to approach the subject from multiple perspectives.’

As can be seen from the conference proceedings, we did not achieve what we aimed for. The theme was too vast. We knew as much; a new field is always difficult to handle. Despite this, we still hope that the participants got something out of the conference, and we also hope that the readers of the proceedings will benefit from them.

I wish to finish this editorial note by acknowledging my colleague Björn Dahla. For many years we organised the Donner symposia and edited the conference proceedings together. I owe him my sincere gratitude.

I also want to warmly thank Maria Vasenkari who, for many years, did the necessary, extensive technical work in order to follow the conference proceedings through into print.

Töre Ahlbäck
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MINJA BLOM

Television vampire fandom and religion

Introduction

Popular culture and fandom provide a setting where people can reflect on the questions of life. Jennifer Porter, who has studied the religious aspects of Star Trek fandom, says that Star Trek defines for many of its fans what it means to be human. It also discusses the way things are, and the way they should, or could, be in our reality (Porter 2009: 278). In this article I will show that television shows Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997–2003), True Blood (2008–) and the Vampire Diaries (2009–) have made the same kind of impact on their fans.

The notion that institutional forms of religion have decreased in Western culture is broadly recognized, even though the extent of this development is being discussed. Religion has become a more private matter, based on personal choices, and it is being practised outside of religious institutions (see e.g. Bruce 1996, Kääriäinen et al. 2003, Possamai 2005). The need to understand reality, to get a confirmation of values, find hope for the future and a community in which people can be themselves has not vanished, even though the interest in religious institutions is decreasing in Western societies.

People search for the religious building blocks of their worldviews from different sources, and the media is one of them. Religion and popular culture scholar Conrad Ostwalt argues that people go to movies and read books because these forms of popular culture function like traditional religions. Popular culture offers ways to understand reality and life. People increasingly seek in popular culture the meaning, identity and community that was once found in religion (Ostwalt 1995: 158; Ostwalt 2003). People build their worldviews and religiosity by taking elements from different cultural products such as films, literature, music and games (Pesonen et al. 2011: 14).

In this article I will argue that the fandom of the television series Buffy the Vampire Slayer, True Blood and the Vampire Diaries have many aspects that connect them to religion. My aim is not to say that fandom is perceived by the fans as a religion, or that it is felt to be a religious choice to be a fan. Rather I agree with the notion presented by Sean McCloud that “[b]oth religion and popular culture help people create and infuse their lives with meaning, iden-
tity, community, memory, tradition, and power through the use of various cultural items’ (McCloud 2010: 335). The term religion in my study refers to the ways in which people make sense of their lives culturally, are a part of a community, re-enforce and share values, share experiences, and find hope and solace in life crises. In this article I analyse aspects of vampire television fandom with reference to Ninian Smart’s understanding of religious dimensions (Smart 1998). I will also consider the connection between fandom and lived religion, mainly through the work of Meredith McGuire (2008). In my analyses I will use information and material I have gathered from internet fan sites, forums and blogs of *Buffy*, *True Blood* and the *Vampire Diaries*.

**Buffy the Vampire Slayer, True Blood and the Vampire Diaries**

Vampires are figures that come and go in popular culture and they always evolve to meet the needs of a specific time (see e.g. Hakola 2011). The current fascination and visibility of vampires in popular culture is largely due to the *Twilight* phenomenon, based on the books of Stephanie Meyer. This phenomenon has made it possible for *True Blood* and the *Vampire Diaries* to be aired, even though they portray very different kinds of vampire stories. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, on the other hand originated before the current vampire frenzy, and it has influenced all of the present television and film representations of vampires. *Buffy, True Blood* and the *Vampire Diaries* are all shows that have formed their own fan bases. Also many of the fans of one show are at least familiar with the other two shows, or even fans of them too. The vampire genre usually connects fans together, but being part of the fandom of one vampire lore can also make it hard to accept different kinds of vampire stories.

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was a very remarkable show because it influenced the entire teenage, fantasy, horror, and action genre. *Buffy* was originally made as a movie in 1992, but it was not a success. However the screenwriter Joss Whedon, whose original idea the *Buffy* character was, got another chance to tell the story of Buffy on television. *Buffy* portrays the coming-of-age story of a teenage girl, but with an added twist of fantasy and horror. The girl has superhuman strength and mental abilities because her task in life is to kill vampires and demons. Fortunately she does not have to do it alone; she has help from a watcher, who trains her, as well as from her best friends – a witch, a werewolf, and a regular guy with lots of courage. She also gets help from her vampire boyfriend, who is a good guy because he has regained his human soul. The basic story tells of a girl who can save the world and who has
friends to support her in this effort. The heroism is based on the community of friends. The evil of the world is not something outside of people, but stems from weakness and fear which makes people hurt each other. In *Buffy* the world is a place where bad and sad things happen to everyone, but the fight against the evils which are in ourselves or in the actions of others, is the only right thing to do.

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was on television for seven seasons and it formed a large international fan base. The makers of the show have often talked about the way the fans made it possible for the show to be picked up for second season. At the end of the 1990s internet communities were beginning to form and fans of *Buffy* found each other online. They also spread the word about the show to other potential audiences. In media studies the online *Buffy* fandom has been seen as one of the first to influence television production. In addition to helping the show to be picked up for continuing seasons, the fans’ opinions sometimes influenced the way the storyline and the characters were written. The internet fan sites of *Buffy* were regularly read by the producers and writers of the show. The fandom of *Buffy* has remained strong, even though the show has been off the air for almost ten years. New fans have found the show on DVD or the internet, and the fan communities, as well as new productions from Joss Whedon, keep the old fans active.

*True Blood* is based on the Sookie Stackhouse book series (2000–) written by Charlaine Harris. The television show, produced by HBO, has changed a lot of the characters, stories and even themes of the books. Like *Buffy*, *True Blood* also has a young woman as a heroine, and she also has superhuman powers. Sookie Stackhouse is a telepath in the small town of Bon Temps and the story begins when she meets and falls in love with vampire Bill. In *True Blood* the vampires have ‘gotten out of the coffin’ and revealed their existence to humans, because of synthetic blood (Tru Blood) that can fulfil their need for human blood. The world of *True Blood* is filled with supernatural features and beings such as vampires, werewolves, shapeshifters, fairies and witches. In all of these groups there are good and bad individuals, just as there are among humans.

As a heroine Sookie walks in the footsteps of Buffy: she stands up to all the other supernatural beings that threaten her. *True Blood* is clearly targeted to a more mature audience than the teenager-oriented shows *Buffy* and the *Vampire Diaries*. The world is darker, the violence and sex are shown very explicitly, and current social problems are addressed more noticeably. But the themes addressed in *True Blood* are similar to *Buffy* and the *Vampire Diaries*. One main theme in all of these shows is how to be good; who can be good
and how to make amends for bad things. The monsters in these shows are also often the humans, while the creatures who look like monsters are seeking ways to be good.

The *Vampire Diaries* is based on a book series, the *Vampire Diaries* (1991–) written by L. J. Smith. The *Vampire Diaries* is basically a teen show, but it has all the same themes of right and wrong, good and evil, life and death that the other shows have. The heroine is Elena, who is also a supernatural being: a doppelganger. Vampire brothers Stefan and Damon both love Elena and try to redeem themselves in order to be good vampires. As in *Buffy* the evil vampires are beaten by the community of Elena’s friends, which includes a witch, a vampire, a werewolf and Elena’s brother who is a regular guy with a lot of courage.

### Fandom and popular culture

Fandom has become a more respected way to show one’s interest in something. People speak more openly about the things that interest them, and they also more often call themselves fans. The term *fan* is difficult to define. As the media scholar Kaarina Nikunen has pointed out, the term fan is used to refer to many different forms and degrees of involvement. People can also be fans of many different things. The term was originally related to sport audiences and sport fandom is still one of the most visible forms of fandom. Usually in media studies fandom is seen as a strong and passionate admiration that is connected to a popular cultural phenomenon. Nikunen also points out that fandom can be seen as being extreme and commonplace at the same time (Nikunen 2005: 18).

An extreme aspect of fandom is the way fans are viewed as fanatical about and overly enthusiastically involved with the object of their interest. The media scholar Henry Jenkins fought this kind of understanding of fans in his groundbreaking fan study *Textual Poachers* (1992). At that time the term fan was usually connected to people whose interests in popular culture seemed strange and who were seen as being dangerously out of touch with reality. Jenkins claimed that the fans’ involvement in something that is not generally considered to be art or higher culture threatens the cultural hierarchies of taste, and that is why fans have been labelled as something not normal. But ‘good taste and aesthetic merit are not natural or universal’ (Jenkins 1992: 12–13, 16). They are culturally constructed by those who have more influence and cultural power (see e.g. Herkman 2001). Because fans are dedicated to
something that is generally seen as mere mass entertainment, their involve-
ment seems odd and misplaced. Also the commercial interests of popular
culture are often emphasised and fans are seen merely as passive consumers.
Jenkins’ work helped to change the academic understanding of fans, when
he showed in his study that fans can be active producers and manipulators of
meanings (Jenkins 1992: 23). The negative stereotype of fandom however still
persists in the everyday usage of the word.

The commonplace aspect of fandom is connected to how the ordinary
and routine things around us construct our conceptions and values without
us even noticing it (Nikunen 2005: 19). In media studies fandom is seen as
meaning-making. Fans use the objects of their fandom, as well as the fandom
itself, as a part of the process through which they construct their identities.
The audience’s socio-cultural background and their own life experiences are
the basis from which the television shows’ stories, worldviews, and values are
reflected upon. Through this process people give meaning to what they see.
Many scholars believe that popular culture can provide meaningful experi-
ences. The enjoyment and positive feelings gained from it can be important
resources to help get though everyday life. In popular culture and fandom
there is also usually a strong community aspect. Popular culture can provide
knowledge and models to follow that people can use in their daily lives. This
has been seen as an example of popular culture empowering people (Herkman

Vampire fans and the internet

Internet fan forums are the places where fans meet and discuss the shows.
There are a lot of different sites that are dedicated to the shows. There are
international and national fan sites that mainly interconnect information
about the shows. Each show has its own official site, but all the rest are cre-
ated and maintained by the fans. Fan sites may include discussion forums, but
mainly these are separate. There are discussion forums about specific shows.
Fans also meet to discuss the shows on sites that give information about tele-
vision shows and films in general, like Internet Movie Database (IMDb) and
Television Without Pity (TWoP). Facebook and Twitter are used extensively
by fans as well. The shows have their own Facebook pages, and fans form
groups and keep in touch by Facebook. On Twitter fans follow the actors and
chat amongst themselves. Fans also write blogs.
Plot twists and the characters are the most discussed topics on these sites. At first glance the forums appear to be a place where people talk to their friends after watching something entertaining. This is a part of it, but the relationships of the shows and the fan community are more complex. To many fans the shows have a deeper meaning than just entertainment. Fans can also have close relationships with people around the world on the basis of their common fandom.

Fandom and the practical and ritual dimensions

Ninian Smart has formed a list of seven religious dimensions so that: ‘we can give a balanced description of the movements of which have animated the human spirit and taken a place in the shaping of society, without neglecting either ideas or practices’ (Smart 1998: 21). To understand television vampire fandom better it is useful to analyse it by means of this list of dimensions, as well as to look at the connections between fandom and lived religion.

According to Smart every religious tradition involves practices such as worship, preaching, prayers and meditation (Smart 1998: 13). In the fandom of Buffy, True Blood and the Vampire Diaries the practical and ritual dimensions take the form of watching the shows, going online to discuss them and meeting other fans. Watching the shows provides an everyday ritual. The fans adapt their schedules in order to be able to see the shows. It can also be an escape from the routines and demands of everyday life:

True Blood is the one thing I can count on right now. I’m going to school, pre-med, and working almost full time and when Sunday night comes around, my world stops so I can be taken away into the fictional town of Bon Temps, or wherever the show is in the night’s episode. It gives me an hour to just dissociate from myself and enjoy the show. No show or movie has ever done that. It’s almost existential. I love the show and all the fans around the world that I talk to on Twitter and IMDb. . . . It’s an amazing show, with an amazing fan base, and while I don’t have many friends that watch the show, I feel a part of a fantastic – and LARGE – group of people! (The Vault 2011a).

This fan uses True Blood as an escape from life’s pressures. For an hour she can just be. The escape has brought another positive aspect into her life; the fan community. The show that has a meaningful role in her life and routines has
also given her a new social group to belong to. She has become a part of the fan community online.

The religious studies scholar Sheila Briggs has pointed out that cult television shows, such as *Xena the Warrior Princess*, engage their fans in the same activities that provide the texture of everyday life in religious communities. These are, for example, sharing common meals, acting for social justice, finding comfort in illness, and receiving and giving solace (Briggs 2009: 174–5). The fans of vampire shows share common meals at meetings and conventions, usually organized by the fans themselves. The fans act for social justice by doing voluntary work, activism for equality, and collecting funds for charity. Some have even changed their occupation to become social workers. Fans have found hope, support and strength to carry on, from both the shows and the fan community.

These practices are not exclusively part of the realm of religious behaviour, but they are part of the notion of lived religion as ‘what matters’ to people (Orsi 2010: lxi). The media and religion scholar Diane Winston argues that applying the concept of lived religion to entertainment media would make it possible to reconsider seemingly temporary narratives as being part of the cultural material that helps us to make sense of our lives, our relationships, and our search for meaning. According to Winston, a lived religion can be detected in the ways the viewers watch television and integrate it into their daily experiences and meaning-making (Winston 2009a: 5 and 2009b: 428). Popular culture can be seen to be producing and reflecting a form of lived religion, the everyday religiosity that is not necessarily connected to religions institutions (Pesonen et al. 2011: 14).

**Experiential and emotional dimensions**

Smart argues that emotions and experiences are significant in the formation and development of religious traditions and play an important part in all the religious dimensions. Rituals, doctrines and myths lose their meaning as ‘[r]itual without feeling is cold, doctrines without awe or compassion are dry, myths which do not move hearers are feeble’ (Smart 1998: 14).

Here is an example of the emotional connection and experience fans can get from the shows:

> I had been attacked and he was part of the team of crisis workers who helped me get through my experience. . . . I didn't believe I would ever
be able to be loved or accepted, that I was damaged. X and I eventually started talking about Buffy and how it had motivated him to become a crisis worker, to fight the good fight, and to understand his life in a whole different level. . . . I saw Buffy finally and it blew me away – Buffy tasked to fight demons, never having a choice and yet struggling to make it right, wondering if being a Slayer will prevent her from ever having a normal life then being loved by Angel. I knew that feeling; it was like there was hope in me for the first time in months. . . . It’s given me the ability to love, laugh and feel again, to understand that life can be terrible and hard, scary and messy and complicated, but worth walking through (Buffy essays blog 2011).

The fandom of the crisis worker created the fandom of the writer, as he encouraged her to watch the show. The writer of this message was struggling with a horrible experience and found in Buffy something she could relate to. The writer saw the fight in her own life as something similar to Buffy’s struggles. The fictional character overcoming obstacles in her life gave her hope. The experience of watching the show, as well as talking about it with the crisis worker, had the effect of bringing normal human experiences and feelings into the life of the writer. She also formed an understanding of life through the show, which was in accordance with her history as a victim of violence. In Buffy it is emphasized that in life there are hardships and suffering, but it is worth the fight.

The other theme of the text, the hope gained from Buffy, is also a feature of Star Trek fandom as well. Porter has noticed that:

Star Trek fans speak of Star Trek as something that gives them hope for the future, that provides solace in times of grief or fear, that motivates them to keep going when life seems darkest, that sparks in them the experience and conviction that life makes sense (Porter 2009: 278).

Even though the vampire shows don’t seem to have much in common with Star Trek, they both influence their fans the same way.

Many fans have written online that ‘the show saved my life’ of that ‘without the show I’d be dead by now’. This may seem to be an overestimation of the power of these television programmes. But the reality is that many fans have had to deal with mental or physical abuse at school, depression, and other serious adversities in their youth or early adulthood. In these situations the television shows and the fan communities have provided a way to survive. The next fan text is about this:
I feel like I’m a part of something exciting. I have something to look forward to. My life was falling apart until I first saw the Vampire Diaries. The show saved my life. I’m so in love with it and I’m really thankful to everyone on the show. Without you guys I’d be dead by now (Vampire Diaries Forums 2011).

The text is very short, but it reveals the reality of many fans’ lives. Life is difficult, a struggle, and you need something to hold on to, something to look forward to. The fan has used the Vampire Diaries as a lifeboat. Anticipation about the show’s next episode has given him enough hope to get through the week, to survive life. This is also a very important and often visible aspect of the fan writings. The shows provide a beacon of light that the fans can follow, and gradually get out of the darkness of their current life situations.

The narrative or mythic dimension

The narrative or mythic dimension refers to the sacred stories of religion(s). They can be about, for example, the beginning of the world, and the end of the world, about heroes and heroines, or about evil (Smart 1998: 15). The stories of the vampire shows are the basis of fandom. Diane Winston sees television-watching as a link in the chain of sacred storytelling. Winston connects these television stories to the Christian traditions of hearing the scriptures, or reading stained glass windows (Winston 2009a: 2).

An interesting example of the connection between popular culture and mythology is from Terhi Utrianen’s study of the suicide notes of Finnish women. Their contents showed that women used quotes from well-known poems and lyrics from Finnish popular music in places where they wanted to say something that was hard to put down in words, but was still something very important. The quotes appeal to shared understandings of values; what matters in life, and the relationship between life and death. Utrianen sees the use of these texts as a way of referring to current Finnish myths which have been woven together from different cultural elements, including popular culture (Utriainen 1997: 109–10).

Diane Winston sees that social and cultural concerns and metaphysical questions are presented in the stories on television. These stories then explore and shape notions of identity and destiny (Winston 2009a: 2). The existential questions that have long been responded to in religious myths are now part of the storytelling in television shows. The television stories also fulfil
the functions of myths by forming values and offering models of behaviour. One difference is that myths were previously said to uphold the unity of the community (Sjöblom 1997: 45). Television myths form the community by bringing together people who share the values and ideals which are being presented in the shows.

Death is one of the most manifest features of these vampire television myths. The media scholar Outi Hakola argues that the living dead characters of Hollywood cinema bring out the problematic presence of death in our lives and in our culture. On the other hand, these films reveal how important it is for the viewers to confront and deal with death, and the questions revolving around it. Hakola’s research shows how the treatment of death in the movies with the portrayal living dead characters gives the audience an opportunity to contemplate their own mortality (Hakola 2011: 236, 245).

The doctrinal and philosophical dimension

Doctrine is formed out of the structured and considered beliefs of the tradition, which are shaped from its narratives (Smart 1998: 17). Television shows or fandoms do not have their own doctrines which the fans would see as something they believe in, or that they have to follow. For example, most fans do not believe that vampires walk among us, or that the magic represented in the shows is real. The doctrinal and philosophical questions arise from Christian traditions, folk beliefs and other values which are current in Western culture. People do not watch these shows in a cultural vacuum. They are interpreting them through the prism of their own culture, worldview, values and life histories. The vampire shows give the viewers stories that are grounded on familiar mythologies and they share common values and socio-cultural reality of the audience.

Christopher Partridge, a scholar of contemporary religion, argues that the supernatural seen in television can influence people’s beliefs. Popular culture can reshape understandings of what is possible in the world and what is not. As one example Partridge has taken the positive portrayal of Wiccans, or witches, in Buffy. Partridge sees that this has influenced viewers, especially young women, motivating some to take an interest in the Wiccan religion and becoming members themselves (Partridge 2004: 130–3). Religious studies scholar Jaakko Närvää who has studied belief in UFOs also points out that film presentations of aliens have a close correlation to the ways people describe their UFO experiences. The images are very similar, and fresh ways in which
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aliens are presented in the films will quickly be seen in the people's UFO stories (Närvä 2011). The kind of belief-formation Partridge and Närvä refer to is not evident in my material, but nevertheless the vampire shows influence the way fans perceive their lives and reality.

Aspects of the Christian tradition can be detected in these vampire shows. This is not a surprise, because they are made for an audience in the United States. The Christian tradition is woven into Western culture. In the shows the concepts of the soul, life after death, demons, heaven and hell are all apparent. The questions of life are discussed through concepts associated with the Christian tradition. For example in Buffy a soul is what distinguishes humans from demons, and when Buffy dies she goes to heaven. It is easy for people to connect to the stories and ideas that are familiar to them. Vampire shows use this familiarity, but adjust the tradition to make it interesting for the audiences of today. In connection with current Western culture, the Christian tradition and its institutions are also criticized in vampire shows, especially concerning the rights of women and homosexuals.

Fans do not usually perceive their fandom to be a religious activity. But there are also exceptions; fans who do see their fandom as being a part of their religious commitment. One fan talked about the way she had been mentally abused at school and she wrote that:

I myself am a Christian. And call me creepy, but I like to see it as God sort of gave me Buffy to get me through the roughest years of my life (What Buffy means to you 2011).

The fan connected her religious beliefs with the hope and solace she had received from Buffy. It is interesting that despite her religious commitment she did not find her consolation in a church, but in television. This comes very close to the idea of a lived religion. One of the scholars involved in forming the concept of lived religions, Meredith McGuire, argues that the commitments to religious groups or belief systems do not necessarily determine the everyday practice and meaning-making of individuals. Even though people belong to religious groups or institutions, their most meaningful religious practices and beliefs can be, for example a civil activity, or gardening (McGuire 2008: 6–8). McGuire says that '[t]he religious practices and stories with which people make sense of their lives are always changing, adapting and growing' (12).
The ethical and legal dimension

The values of a tradition are affected by narratives and doctrines. A law that has been incorporated by a tradition can be called the ethical dimension of that religion (Smart 1998: 18). The reflection and action upon the values presented in the vampire narratives is clear in many fan texts. This is about True Blood:

There are a lot of shows out there that make you think about life and death, but this show brings to the table so much more. It shows the taboos and lines that people don't want to cross in television or even in life. This show really makes me think about how I feel about my life and other lives and even underlining feelings that I have on certain subjects. I love how this show brings out the raw feeling of what life and death is all about (The Vault 2011b).

This message shows how the fan is reflecting on his values and his understanding of reality through the show. True Blood, like the other vampire shows, deals with questions of good and evil, life, death, and the meaning of it all. The shows also connect these questions to our current reality, and the values of our contemporary culture are reflected upon. These include questions about the roles of men and women, sexuality, homosexuality, cultural fears, how we should face people who are different from 'us' and how we should treat people from cultural minorities. I think these are the issues that have made this fan reflect upon his values and understanding of life.

In the fan's text which was presented earlier, a crisis worker introduced Buffy to an attacked woman. The crisis worker had changed the course of his own life, inspired by the heroic model of Buffy and the worldview given in the show. The worldview in Buffy is that bad things do happen to good people, the evils of life are usually caused by humans, and that even though the world will always have evil in it, the fight against it is valuable and really the only thing to do. These aspects of the show are not the only reason why the crisis worker started to 'fight the good fight', but they resonated with his own values and understanding.

The theme of models to follow is also an aspect of other fandoms. Jennifer Porter writes that the ideology of Star Trek has influenced fans to do volunteer work at food banks and soup kitchens, to donate for charity and to support the United Nations (Porter 2009: 278). Fans are fighting for the ideals of the show in real life, trying to make a difference. This is seen in both the fans of Star Trek and Buffy the Vampire Slayer, as the fan message above implied.
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The social and institutional dimension

Religious movements are embodied in groups of people. The social and institutional dimension refers to the way a faith works among people (Smart 1998: 19–20). The myths that are represented in the vampire television shows form new communities. People who have found something special in these shows find others like themselves on the internet. It is interesting that the fans have same kinds of experiences of the shows. The meaning of the community can be seen in the fan texts presented earlier. The importance of the fan community is clear also in that fans have written on the internet about their experiences and others have continued the conversation. Community is an essential part of fandom and the relationships within the community can become very important to fans.

Even though people can choose what stories they find meaningful, after finding them they form a community. Whilst in earlier periods of human history the community would offer shared stories, the myths, now in our world of new media people find stories that are meaningful to them and then build the community. In my source material most of the fans are active in fan communities and write about the meanings of the relationships with other fans, and the thrill of being a part of that community. But there are many fans who are not actively involved in fan communities. This does not however mean that they are not a part of the community that has been formed. Shared interests connect people and community can be experienced at fan events, where people do not know each other, but are still part of the same group.

Also the fan community is a place in which people can openly be themselves. Even though fandom is more broadly accepted than before, adult fans especially say that other people do not usually understand their involvement in fictional characters and stories. The fan community gives an opportunity to discuss meaningful stories, emotions and characters with others, who also find all this important in their lives.

The material dimension

The material dimension of religion is connected to buildings and works of art, but also to natural features, such as the mountains or rivers that people have connected with sacred elements (Smart 1998: 21). The material dimension in fandom is the shows themselves, the DVDs, the merchandise connected to the shows, and the fan conventions. The merchandise especially – including
posters, figurines, bags and jewelry – maintains the presence and visibility of the fandom. Fan meetings and conventions are decorated by the images and themes of the shows and people also dress up. These material aspects help to create feelings of community and shared experience.

Television vampire fandom has many links to the dimensions of religion. Smart has also noticed that these dimensions can also be found in various philosophical or social phenomena, such as communism. Smart argues that it is not appropriate to call these phenomena religions, because the participants themselves understand them to be antireligious. Smart, on the other hand, continues to say that the secular worldviews, systems of ideas and practices, are competitors and play in the same league, whether they are religious or not. "They all help to express the various ways in which human beings conceive of themselves and act in the world" (Smart 1998: 26).

Conclusion

Popular culture is a significant aspect of current reality. It influences us without us even noticing, and it is easily accessible. The fan writings of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, True Blood and the Vampire Diaries show that these popular texts, and the communities they have formed, have greatly affected the lives of fans. People have found on their TV-screens stories they can get strength and hope from. The vampire shows deal with the supernatural – vampires, werewolves, and witches – and place them in our contemporary world as if they are a natural part of it. Television vampire stories revolve around topics of death, good and evil, and humanity. These stories have created massive fan communities and even life-changing fan experiences. The reflections upon existential questions, and the way the shows have empowered fans, make this phenomenon important to study in the context of today's religions reality.

I argue that according to Ninian Smart’s religious dimensions fandom can be seen as a religious phenomenon. Smart found that secular worldviews – such as Marxism – may also have many characteristics that link them with these religious dimensions. This shows that the aspects are not only a part of phenomena that are perceived by their followers to be religious. I argue that it is meaningful to connect fandom to the realm of religion, because it fulfils the same needs. Fandom can be seen as a part of our current society's religious reality, where people search for meaning, as well as for reinforcements of their values and beliefs, from many different sources. I argue that people need elements upon which they can form and shape their worldviews and identities. In some form or another, people search for answers to the ques-
tions of life, death, the nature of reality, good and evil, right and wrong, the meaning of our existence. And popular culture can provide those answers for some people.

The connection to lived religion also confirms that fandom is closely related to the phenomenon which is understood as religion. Vampire television fandom has many characteristics which come close to the everyday practices of lived religion, such as a daily practice of watching television or going online, community activities, and seeking meaning and consolation. Fandom fulfils the function of understanding one’s reality by confirming cultural values and beliefs. Fandom also offers individuals the opportunity to be a part of a community by bringing together people who share an interest in the same stories and myths. And, finally, fandom provides a source of hope and solace. Also the beliefs and values of our current reality are represented in these shows, and they resonate to the audience’s worldviews and identities.

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Digital religion out of the book

The loss of the illusion of the ‘original text’ and of the notion of a ‘religion of the book’

As a specialist in the thousands of manuscripts of the New Testament, I am one of a number of scholars working on ancient Greek texts: since the classical age, a detailed knowledge of philology and critical editions of texts have been developed in this field. This knowledge is at risk today because the new digital support draws new parameters for texts and textuality itself. The Italian philosopher Umberto Eco announced the end of the variant in the digital culture, noting that the notion of the ‘original’ text ‘certainly disappears’ (Eco and Origgi 2003: 227). For him, the problem is not really the loss of the ‘original’ production of an author – unless one wishes to reconstruct her/his psychology – but rather the alterations that I can make myself to the texts of other people.

Let’s assume that I download onto my computer La Critique de la raison pure, and that I start to study it, writing my comments between the lines; either I possess a very philological turn of mind and I can recognize my comments, or else, three years later, I could no longer say what is mine and what is Kant’s. We would be like the copyists in the Middle Ages who automatically made corrections to the text that they copied because it felt natural to do so – in which case, any philological concern is likely to go down the drain (Eco and Origgi 2003: 227).

Eco underlines the gradual disappearance of the notion of the ‘original text’; the undermining of the philological approach is tinged with nostalgia for all scholars whose roots are in classical, philosophical or linguistic studies. It is

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1 This article is largely based on an article published in Scholarly Research and Communication, that accepted kindly the reuse of the text. See Clivaz 2012. Thank you to Cécile Pache for the editorial preparation of this article.

2 Thank you to Jenny Read-Heimerdinger for the English translation of this quotation.
interesting to examine how this disappearance of the notion of an ‘original text’ will affect the relationships to the sacred texts of those religions which are called ‘religions of the book’, in the context of a global transformation of the notion of ‘textuality’ itself in Western culture through the development of digital culture. In fact, the modern belief in the existence of a completely stabilized text, clearly attributed to a specific author, goes back no further than the middle of the nineteenth century. It has its roots in the final steps taken in around 1850 to fix the legal status of the author and the text – a legal status chosen and promoted by booksellers for economic reasons, and not by the authors themselves, according to Roger Chartier (see Chartier 1996: 51). It is my belief that this legal development led to the Western fascination for the fixed ‘book’ and to the so-called ‘religions of the book’. At first glance, the expression ‘religions of the book’ seems to be based on the Quranic expression ahl al-kitab, the ‘people of the book’, as stated, for example, by Wilfred Cantwell Smith.3 In fact, it is only in the second part of the nineteenth century that this notion was popularized, from a variety of perspectives, in Western academic discourse. In his wide-ranging article, Smith also makes reference to a programmatic lecture given in London in 1870 by Friedrich Max Müller, ‘Sacred Books of the East’ (Smith 1989: 30, 33), but he makes no mention of what is repeatedly overlooked in research: the gap between the Quranic expression ‘the people of the book’ and the notion, widespread in Western culture, of the ‘religions of the book’. Max Müller sought to present a classification of religions, starting from the notion of the ‘book’ and applied to eight religions:

With these eight religions the library of the Sacred Books of the whole human race is complete, and an accurate study of these eight codes, written in Sanskrit, Pāli, and Zend, in Hebrew, Greek, and Arabic, lastly in Chinese, might in itself not seem too formidable an undertaking for a single scholar (Müller 2004: 56).

His point of view is clear: thanks to the notion of the ‘book’, a universal picture of religions can be obtained; the sacred books are understood as reflecting the image ‘of the real doctrines of the founder of a new religion’ (Müller 2004: 53). Here we face the cultural effect of the legal status given to the printed

3 Smith 1989: 30: ‘It is illuminating, I suggest, to begin with the seventh century AD as the virtually culminating stage of the process, and to trace it then backwards in time.’ I am indebted to my research assistant Nicolas Merminod for providing useful bibliographical information on the topic.
text and its author. In this context, the modern concept of illiteracy/literacy drastically influences perceptions of extremely diverse religions, whereas the perception of the oral traditions and orality in history was one of a devaluation, notably in France since 1880, as Florence Descamps (2005) underlines. At that time, the idea of the ‘religions of the book’ met with considerable success amongst Protestant theologians such as Friedrich Heinrich Geffcken or Carl Theodor A. Liebner, who anachronistically linked Calvin’s doctrine to the idea of Religionbuch (Geffcken 1875: 225; Liebner et al. 1872: 93). On the basis of these observations, I adopt the hypothesis that the fixation of the legal status of the author and the text around 1850 was behind the Western fascination with a fixed ‘book’ and the so-called ‘religions of the book’. Nevertheless, neither Judaism, nor Islam nor Christianity can be reduced to such a concept. Since that time – but only since that time – we are used to a cultural discourse underlining the links between the emergence of the modern book and the Bible, such as that produced by Jean-Claude Carrière. He reminds us that the modern history of the book begins with the history of ‘the’ book, the Bible (see Carrière and Eco 2009: 294):

With the religions of the Book, the book has served not just as a container, as a receptacle, but also as a ‘wide angle’ from which it has been possible for everything to be observed, everything related, maybe even for everything to be decided (Carrière and Eco 2009: 121).

This example of the nineteenth-century emergence of the expression ‘religions of the book’ highlights the fact that we are now only just beginning to unravel all the unconscious cultural statements that the sanctification of printed culture has imposed on us. The second part of this paper will illuminate the effect of the ‘digital out-of-the book culture’ on a small world; the edition of the more than 5,700 manuscripts of the Greek New Testament.

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4 The term illiteracy appears in a dictionary of 1839, and literacy in a dictionary of 1913, see Barnton 2007: 19.
5 On Christianity as a religion not of the book, see Clivaz 2011: 52–5.
6 Thank you to Jenny Read-Heimerdinger for the English translation of this quotation.

Let’s start with a recent ‘bombshell’ that exploded at the end of 2010, in the scholarly world of editors of the Greek New Testament (NT). Since the nineteenth century, critical editing work of the NT has been controlled by the Institute for the New Testament Textual Research (INTF, located in Münster, Germany) for the main printed edition, NA²⁷ (see Nestle and Aland et al. 1993), and by the International Greek New Testament Project (IGNTP), a committee in charge of a slowly emerging, comprehensive critical edition of the NT which was inaugurated in 1949.⁷ At the last general meeting in the field of biblical studies – the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) annual meeting in November 2010 in Atlanta – a new, independent edition of the Greek New Testament was presented and offered to all the participants, published by a respected scholar in the field, Michael Holmes (2010), with the support of Logos Software and the Society of Biblical Literature: neither the INTF nor the IGNTP had been informed of the project. This edition has come as a shock for scholars working in the field.⁸ Why?

The new product is now freely available online, whereas the complete, printed NA²⁷ edition is available only in paper form⁹ and has to be purchased. As a consequence, for practical reasons this new, digital edition of the Greek NT could well become the main one, which is problematic because of the scientific quality of the edition. Indeed, even though SBL justifies the project with arguments grounded essentially on a financial basis,¹⁰ this ‘new’ edition overall implies a return to the nineteenth edition of B. A. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort (1881) – all the information provided by the papyri, for example,

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⁷ Only two NT gospels, Luke and John, have so far been published in this comprehensive edition, and John only in part. The IGNTP committee comprises twenty-two international scholars working in collaboration toward an edition of the Greek New Testament. See IGNTP 2012.

⁸ A panel was organized on this new Greek NT edition at the SBL annual meeting 2011.

⁹ The Greek text of the NA²⁷ is freely available here, but without the apparatus and other complements of the printed text: bibelwissenschaft.de 2012.

¹⁰ See SBL Greek New Testament 2012: ‘The many benefits and features of the widely used “standard text” of the Greek New Testament (i.e., the Nestle–Aland and United Bible Societies editions) are well known and widely appreciated, but it does not meet the needs of all users. For example, many scholars and students, especially those living in under-resourced regions, do not have easy access to an up-to-date critical edition of the Greek New Testament in an electronic form.’
is omitted. Moreover, the apparatus is not based on the manuscripts but on previous printed editions (see Holmes 2010: XI). In other words, this edition represents a conservative shift and is now available online for free, sponsored by the American SBL. Its chief purpose is to convey the impression that scholars have finally achieved a stable, unified and simplified Greek text of the New Testament.11 There is nothing surprising in this turn of events: it is, in my opinion, a logical response at a time when digital culture has the potential to redefine entirely the way we think about the editing of ancient texts; particularly texts supported by a large number of different manuscripts, as is the case with Homer – as I will develop below – and particularly the New Testament. It will be useful to map out the general situation with regard to the editing of ancient texts. When it comes to the New Testament, it involves an attempt to get a somewhat ‘fixed, stabilized, sacred text’.

Whereas some US scholars try to go this way, other European scholars keep an open mind about the digital potential for an open-ended and interactive edition of the New Testament ‘out of the Book’. The possibility of a collaborative authorship for the edition of the NT has already been highlighted by scholars such as David Parker or Ulrich Schmid, who have recommended the creation of ‘an interactive apparatus criticus, in which the kind of information visible will be partly controlled by the user. . . . In the digital edition, the transcription of the verse will be available, and the user will be able to scrutinize the editorial decisions’, even if it means ‘a weakening of the status of standard editions, and with that a change in the way in which users of texts perceive their tasks’ (Parker 2003–4: 404). Schmid has called for a ‘fully interactive digital edition’, with the possibility of also incorporating data available for the NT from the various relevant ancient languages and not just the Greek manuscripts (Schmid 2012: 190). The fact that scholars can now compare a baseline text with real manuscript photographs highlights what has only too often been forgotten: a critical edition is always a reconstructed text, composed according to some point of view or another. This main text always belongs to a period of history, as has long been known: the Codex Sinaiticus represents the New Testament according to the Sinaiticus community, those who also read the Shepherd and the Epistle to Barnabas as Scripture (Codex Sinaiticus 2012); the textus receptus represents the New Testament according

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11 An initiative such as this cannot but serve as a reminder of the heated debate in the summer of 2010 at the SBL forum, following the resignation of Prof. Ronald S. Hendel because of what he perceived to be an excessively conservative direction being taken by SBL (see SBL 2012). This new Greek NT edition would appear to confirm the new direction.
Digital religion out of the book to Erasmus and his followers; and the NA27 represents the New Testament according to Eberhard Nestle and Kurt Aland, in discussion with other scholars in a modern context. There has never existed an edition of the New Testament without an ‘according to’, or, in other words, without a cover – the symbol of institutionalization and power – to hold the folios or pages together.

Even though reflections such as these can be found in NT scholarship, no real, fresh conception of a digital edition of the NT has emerged until now. This situation can be explained on the grounds of an ideological cause and of institutional factors which are currently leading to an emerging deregulation of scholarly editing of the New Testament. The ideological reason becomes apparent when comparing the digital edition of the NT with the Homer Multitext project, which has opted to develop a digital tool based on the history of readings rather than on the edition of the Homeric ‘text’. As their website states,

The Homer Multitext views the full historical reality of the Homeric textual tradition as it evolved for well over a thousand years, from the pre-Classical era well into the medieval. It is an edition of Homer that is electronic and web-based. Unlike printed editions, which offer a reconstruction of an original text as it supposedly existed at the time and place of its origin, the Homer Multitext offers the tools for reconstructing a variety of texts as they existed in a variety of times and places (The Homer Multitext Project 2012).

Consequently, access is provided to photographs and diplomatic texts of the manuscripts, not to a classical critical edition. It goes without saying that in NT scholarship no one has yet dared present a NT ‘Multitext’ edition, since the relationship of NT scholars with their text has been so strongly determined by the culture of the ‘religion of the book’. Such a task would seem all the more complex and urgent than another current issue: the emergence of a hybrid, digital scholarship, beyond Western cultural boundaries.

The emergence of a hybrid, digital scholarship beyond Western boundaries: the example of the Greek and Arabic NT manuscripts

The digital revolution is also transforming the familiar Western boundaries of scholarship, as can be demonstrated by the example of the Greek and Arabic NT manuscripts. This topic presents a very interesting case in cultural studies
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by explaining why, until now, the Western academic world has not really been interested in Arabic manuscripts of the NT. Since G. Graf’s volumes (1944), the twentieth century has not produced any important work on the subject.12 The textbooks of New Testament textual criticism (NTTC) make very brief mention of the Arabic NT manuscripts, sometimes without presenting a bibliography (see Aland and Aland 1989: 214; Vaganay and Amphoux 1991: 42–4; Parker 2008: 124). Two factors account for this situation. The first is the complexity of the relationship between Western and Oriental cultures, as analysed by Said and developed in cultural and post-colonial studies (see the key work by Edward Said 1978). The following quotation by Kurt and Barbara Aland is symptomatic of this point: ‘… unfortunately the Arabists of today are hardly concerning themselves with the transmission of the New Testament, although there are many interesting problems here…’ (Aland and Aland 1989: 214). There is a twofold assumption in this statement of the Alands: the interest should necessarily go from Arabic studies to Greek studies, and it should be obvious that everybody ought to be interested in working on the New Testament manuscripts. The second factor is that the main quest of NT textual criticism has been the establishment of the earliest and most accurate NT text, based on the oldest manuscripts. From that perspective, the Arabic NT manuscripts have always been disqualified because of their rather late dating, as can be seen in David Ewert’s statement: ‘Since the Arabic versions are so late, they are not useful as witnesses to the original text of NT’ (Ewert 1990: 171). On that point, the thrust of narrative textual criticism (see Parker 1994: 704; Clivaz 2010a: 195) shows the usefulness of manuscripts like these, in terms of the history of reading and the history of early Christianity. From that point of view, the Arabic NT manuscripts represent an incredibly rich field of research.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century however, research into the Arabic NT manuscripts does seem to have been reactivated. My claim is that this renewed interest should be interpreted within the framework of what can be called an emerging digital Christianity. Classical Western scholarship on Christian Arabic in the past 30 years has advertised a new publication of Graf’s Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur (see Graf 1979, Samir 2007) and regularly produces a Christian Arabic bibliography in the Journal

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12 New publications have been arriving over recent years: Thomas 2007; a soon to be published review of the research is to be found in Kashouh 2012. My thanks are due to my research assistant Sara Schultess for the bibliographical references and her thoughts on the topic. See Schultess 2012a and 2012b: 333–44.
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For Eastern Christian Studies, as well as projects such as that of Prof. J. P. Monferrer-Sala on Greek-Arabic NT manuscripts. But the more lively productions come from Beirut, in connection with the Center of Documentation and Arabic Christian Researches (CEDRAC): a critical edition of the Arabic Gospel according to Luke has been produced by Sister Josephine Nasr (unpublished), as well as an important study by Hikmat Kashouh, The Arabic Versions of the Gospels, published by de Gruyter in 2012. This is a PhD thesis, which was carried out under the supervision of David Parker, and it throws light on a discrete but ongoing work on these manuscripts from Graf up to today, offering an abridged list of 200 Arabic gospel manuscripts which are grouped into families (Pearse 2010).

While this PhD is a fine Birmingham product, it nevertheless shows distinct signs of adhering to the agenda of a particular identity; as for example when Kashouh concludes that ‘this thesis suggests that the Gospels were first translated into Arabic in either the sixth or early seventh century’ (Kashouh 2012: 380). A sentence like this could have huge implications in terms of cultural identities, for it suggests that Christian texts may have existed in Arabic before Muslim texts, a problematic issue and one argued over by both communities. Similar identity quests can be observed on certain Muslim websites which show the emergence of a hybrid Western scholarly discourse. This discourse appears thanks to the less institutionally regulated place of expression offered by the internet, on certain Muslim websites devoted to the study of Greek NT manuscripts. They often set out accurate information, as can be found, for example, on the website Islamic Awareness (Islamic Awareness 2012). The ideological point of view is nevertheless clearly expressed on the homepage of this website: ‘The primary purpose of Islamic-Awareness website [sic] is to educate Muslims about the questions and issues frequently raised by the Christian Missionaries and Orientalists. You will find a variety of excellent articles and responses to missionary and orientalist writings.’ An extended inquiry into some of the Muslim websites that study the Greek NT manuscripts in English and Arabic would be in order here so as to understand their interest in these manuscripts. It is at one and the same time frustrating and interesting for me, as a New Testament scholar, to see a Muslim Arabic website providing photographs of Greek NT manuscripts (see sheekh-3arb.net 2012): what view of my field of research is given by such a website? This website clearly illustrates how apparently separate scholarly worlds are meeting

13 A project in Cordoba, BFF2002-02930.
on the web, but without supposing any interaction between them for the time being.\textsuperscript{14}

The emergence of a digital, hybrid Western scholarly discourse can also be discerned, for example, on a website such as the University of Leeds Arabic Language Computing Research Group, announced on AWOL (2010). Indeed, the link indicated by AWOL, rather than leading to an Arabic Studies department of the University of Leeds, leads to the Faculty of Engineering.\textsuperscript{15} All these surprising facts merit closer investigation and a three-year research project will be done on the topic at the University of Lausanne during 2013–16.\textsuperscript{16}

Digital media offer new opportunities for developing a hybrid Western scholarly discourse, as these Christian and Muslim examples show. Within this hybrid scholarly discourse, the Arabic and Greek NT manuscripts become the pretext for new identity quests and tensions between groups/communities. The phenomenon contributes to the shaping of an emerging digital Christianity, out of which will come perhaps a multitext edition of the New Testament. As the previous sections sought to demonstrate, the fields of NT manuscripts and of the editing of ancient texts are particularly sensitive to the emergence of digital humanities. Consequently, I would like to conclude this article with a call for the writing of a cultural history of digital humanities, under the banner of the programmatic essay by Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, first published in 1967.

Conclusion: the first edition of the Barthesian ‘Death of the Author’ (1967)

According to Willard McCarty and Susan Hockey, the starting point for this new field of knowledge was the ‘application of computing to the humanities . . . about 50 years ago, in the late 1940s, by a Jesuit scholar, Father Roberto Busa,

\textsuperscript{14} Most surprisingly, it should be noted that the website of the Center for the New Testament Manuscripts (Texas) has borrowed a webpage from www.sheekh-3arb.net, without noting their choice to do so (see the Vaticans Scripture Index on that webpage: CSNTM 2012).

\textsuperscript{15} See Arabic Language Computing Research @ Leeds 2012; this website leads to Qurany 2012.

\textsuperscript{16} I have just been awarded a three-year grant from the Swiss National Fund to open a PhD research project on this topic, co-supervised by Prof. David Bouvier (Ancient Greek, University of Lausanne) and Prof. Herman Teule (Early Christian Arabic Literature, University of Nijmegen). Sara Schulthess will be in charge of it during 2013–16.
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in the *Index Thomisticus* (McCarty nd: 1; see also Hockey nd). Moreover, it
cannot be forgotten that scientific research in the USA during the Second
World War was the milieu for the production of the first digital inputs, as at-
tested by the important article by Vannevar Bush – ‘As we may think’ (1945)
– where he asks: ‘What are the scientists to do next [after the war]?’ The six-
ties subsequently played a very important role, as stressed by Katie Hafner
and Matthew Lyon (1998: 11–42). Computers were already at work in the
literary imagination and in scholarly perceptions of culture, as the novel *Le
Littératron* by Robert Escarpit (1964) shows, or this 1968 statement by the
French historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie: “Tomorrow’s historian will ei-
ther be a programmer or will not be” (1973: 14). It was also at that time that
Roland Barthes wrote his famous essay ‘The Death of the Author’. If a cultural
history of digital humanities were to be written, it should shed light on this
‘blind spot’ in scholarly perceptions of the thinking of Roland Barthes and
Michel Foucault on the author.18

Barthes and Foucault seemingly spoke about the disappearance, or the
death, of the author at a time when the hypertext and the cyber-world did not
exist, as Roger Chartier summarizes:

> The world of digital texts is a world where texts are displayed, modified,
rewritten, where writing takes place within an already existing piece of
writing, a world where the reader is involved not outside the text but
within the texts themselves, a world where, as Foucault sometimes imag-
ined, texts would not be assigned to an author’s name, where the ‘author’s
function’ would lose its importance in a kind of textuality formed by lay-
ers of discourses that are continually being rewritten and in a permanent
exchange between writers and readers – readers who in their turn are
authors (Chartier 2001: 17–18).19

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17 'L’historien de demain sera programmeur ou ne sera pas.'
18 The classical references are Barthes 1984 and Foucault 1969.
19 'Le monde du texte numérique est un monde où les textes sont déployés, repris,
écrits, où une écriture s’écrit dans une écriture déjà là, un monde où le lecteur in-
tervient non pas sur les marges du texte, mais dans les textes eux-mêmes, un monde
où comme l’avait rêvé parfois Foucault, s’effacerait l’assignation au nom propre, où
s’effacerait la “fonction auteur” dans une sorte de textualité formée de nappes de
discours toujours repris et liés à l’échange permanent entre producteurs et lecteurs –
mais des lecteurs à leur tour auteurs.'
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As we have seen, however, the computer was already in operation in Western culture during the sixties. The search for the very first version of Barthes’ article ‘The Death of the Author’ never fails to occasion surprise. This first version was written in English – and not in French – and appeared without pagination in a multimedia-box in the experimental American review Aspen.20 The first appearance of the topic of the death of the author is therefore represented by a few floating English pages, in a box containing also 4 films, 5 records, 8 boards, 10 printed data and texts. This being so, it is now time to acknowledge that the ‘death of the author’ was proposed within a framework that was itself already influenced by the emergence of the English multi-media culture, as symbolized by the first publication of Barthes’ article. As the question of the twofold emergence of the codex and of Christianity shows (see Clivaz 2011: 25–7), ideas and new writing materials always develop in synergy. The Foucauldian ‘author’s function’ is probably too narrowly defined for it to function now in digital culture (see Neeman 2012: 3–36), where, as Chartier (2001: 17) indicates, ‘readers in their turn are also authors’.

Such an observation was already at the heart of Barthes’ 1967 article, where he states:

The true locus of writing is reading. . . . In this way is revealed the whole being of writing: a text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader: the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of; the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination (Barthes 1967).

Nevertheless, Barthes does not resist the temptation to render the reader absolute with respect to the author: ‘but this destination can no longer be personal: the reader is a man without history, without biography, without psychology; he is only that someone who holds gathered into a single field all the paths of which the text is constituted’ (Barthes 1967). Ultimately, this total and disembodied reader will in a sense reinforce the strength of the ideology of the author during the end of the twentieth century.

With the digital writing medium, we have a very different perception today of the phenomenon of writing, profoundly marked as it is by a plurality of

20 See the first publication of Barthes (1967: 5–6).
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authorship as well as of readership. As I have suggested elsewhere (see Clivaz 2010b), the classical triad ‘author–text–reader’ could be replaced by a plural triad: ‘authors–scribes–readers.’ The ‘text’ is replaced here by the scribes: they are the people who literally make the text. The scribe is the last author and a particularly influential reader. In digital terms, we could call the ancient scribe the scriptor,21 the one who writes and reads, reads and writes, and re-writes again. The exhausting, age-old fight between the author and the reader has probably come to an end with the digital medium of writing and with the figure of the scriptor. Within the digital context there emerges a mass of authors–readers, who seek to understand, speak and write. They are the scriptors of our move beyond Western cultural boundaries, whatever that will look like.

In order, at the end of this article, to open up further avenues I will point out that the synergy between ideas and the support of writing was the blind spot of modernity. This must now be recognized, in order to deconstruct the printed-culture notion of the ‘religions of the book’. New digital interactive and open-ended editions of the Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, and so on sacred texts will help to go beyond the categorization proposed by Max Müller in 1870.

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21 See Barthes 1967: ‘the modern writer (scriptor) is born simultaneously with his text; he is in no way supplied with a being which precedes or transcends his writing, he is in no way the subject of which his book is the predicate; there is no other time than that of the utterance, and every text is eternally written here and now.’
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**Codex Sinaiticus**

**CSNTM**

**The Homer Multitext project**

**IGNTP**

**Islamic Awareness**

**Pearse, R.**

**Qurany**

**SBL**

**SBL Greek New Testament**

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Westcott, B. F., and F. J. A. Hort
The role which the mass media plays in modern society means that it has become a sub-agent of contemporary religious identities. This broadens the religious and theological significance of the mass media as an agent for the construction of personal (belief) systems. While in traditional societies, religion is based upon the authority vested in religious bodies, in complex industrial societies individuals construct religious meaning from a variety of sources. In the latter, communication about religious and spiritual issues is increasingly mediated through print and electronic technologies. The search for God has become a surf ride of spiritual discovery on the internet; even as early as December 1998 a search for ‘God’ produced 3.9 million answers, and just a month later there were already 4.5 million (Maariv, 23.9.1999). The internet has accentuated the process of mediation within Judaism by linking Jews, irrespective of whether they belong to physical communal structures, to a virtual, worldwide Jewish community. Yet a key question to be examined here is the impact of the internet upon existing religious communities. This study examines this question by looking at the Israeli case, and the impact of the internet upon the religious identity of Orthodox Jewry.

It is a reflection of the low level of priority which religion enjoys among mass communications researchers in Israel that little applied research has been carried out concerning the interplay of the media and religion in the Israeli Jewish context. This is even more true in the case of interactive media. The synagogue–state relationship in Israel has been the subject of quite a wide range of research attention (e.g., Abramov 1976, Liebman and Don-Yehiya 1983, Sharkansky 2000). Much less attention has been paid to non-official actors – such as the news media – in research into state–religion relations inside Israel, notwithstanding the existence of a popular, street-level discussion there concerning the media’s coverage of religion (Cohen 2012a). Most research on religion and the media has been carried out in the US context (e.g., Abelman and Hoover 1990, Buddenbaum 1990, Ferre 1990, Garrett-Medill 1999, Hoover 1998). The case of Israel contrasts significantly with the US experi-
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ence, because religion and the Jewish state are, by definition, interwoven. The
coverage of religion in the religious and secular media in Israel has received
little attention (Cohen 2005). This is particularly true with the secular media
(Cohen 2006, Heilman 1990). The question of Jewish theological attitudes
concerning the social role of the media was discussed by E. M. H. Korngott
(1993), Avi Chwat (1995) and Yoel Cohen (2001). To the extent that the sub-
ject has been researched, much of it has been focused upon the relationship
the Haredi press by means of linguistic tools in order to generate the Haredi
outlook in terms of the social role of the media inside the Haredi community.
While the Haredi press has been described by Baumel (2002), Levi (1990),
and Micolson (1990), their work preceded the rise of the internet. Horowitz
(2000) describes early Haredi rabbinical attitudes to the internet. Cohen
(2011) brings this further up to date. Keren Barzilai-Nahon and Gadi Barzilai
(2005) examine how the internet has been adapted by the Haredi community
to meet their needs, and Judith Tydor Baumel-Schwartz (2009) has analysed
Orthodox Jewish women’s internet forums. Yehuda Schwartz (2005) exam-
ines the computer from a Jewish religious law perspective, and Cohen dis-
cusses the broader perspective of Jewish cybertheology (2012b).

In seeking to examine the impact of the internet upon religious identi-
ties and specifically upon Orthodox Jewry – the single dominant approach
inside Israel – it will be instructive to look at the contrasts between the two
communities making up orthodox Jewry: the modern Orthodox (dati leumi)
and the ultra-Orthodox Haredim, accounting for 15 per cent and 8 per cent
respectively of the Israeli Jewish population. The remainder of the popula-
tion is comprised of an estimated 40 per cent traditional, non-strictly reli-
gious population, and 35 per cent secular. Two non-Orthodox streams – the
Conservative and Reform Jews, which make up over 75 per cent of US Jewry
– are not recognised by official Israeli institutions, and so far have a minuscule
presence in Israel. The ‘religious’ are broken into two main groupings: the
modern Orthodox and the ultra-Orthodox, or Haredim (Hebrew for ‘pious
ones’). Both religious communities wish the Jewish state to be substantially
Jewish, rather than just symbolically so. For the modern Orthodox Jews, the
creation of the state of Israel is seen as a positive juncture on the path towards
Jewish messianic redemption. For them there is no conflict between modern-
ity and Jewish goals. Their members participate at all levels, including doing
national army service and engaging in studies at university. The new state
entity should be run along democratic lines as long as this does not clash with
Jewish Law. The ultra-Orthodox Haredi population have a more fundamen-
talist approach to Jewish social communication, but remains removed from mainstream Israeli society.

The Haredi and modern Orthodox reactions reflect a debate among religious educators in both communities about the development of the internet. How have rabbis and educators in these two communities dealt with threats to religious identity presented by the internet? A range of techniques have been used by different religions to block ‘unsuitable’ materials including, in the Roman Catholic case, the *Index of Forbidden Books* and a later ban on Disney, and the delegitimisation of specific persons, such as Galileo (who was placed under house arrest by the Catholic Church for teaching the theory of heliocentrism – the idea that the planets revolve around the Sun), or bans on literature such as those decreed by the Roman Catholic Church (Stout 2002). The Protestant Church sought to educate the individual to be selective and censor undesirable content. These contrasting Catholic and Protestant approaches to media literacy also characterise how the Haredim and modern Orthodoxy in Israel have fought their culture wars against the wider media social environment.

**Haredi exclusivism and the internet threat**

The Haredi outlook is characterised by taking steps to distance their members from the wider world by erecting cultural walls to exclude the influence of non-religious and non-Jewish matter. Haredi rabbis have over the years issued religious decrees (*pesuk din*) banning exposure to mass media forms which are regarded as presenting a threat to Torah family values. From the emergence on to the scene of newspapers in the nineteenth century, through to the development of radio and television, and latterly video, computers, the internet and cellcom phones, Haredi rabbis have continued to enact such decrees. When Israel Television was established in 1968, Haredi rabbis banned their followers from watching television because its content was considered to be morally inappropriate; while entertainment *per se* is not invalidated, the Haredi perspective is nevertheless critical of it, regarding it as nothing more than a relief from such higher values as religious study. Those directed at television and secular newspapers were the most successful of the bans against the media, with the overwhelming majority of Haredim respecting them. The earlier ban on radio – based on a prohibition against hearing gossip (*loshon hara*), as well as on the importance of modesty, as radio programming prior to television had a much wider gamut of subjects, including drama – is less respected than
the television ban because Israel’s ongoing security problems make it difficult for people to adhere to the ban. When video cameras were produced – with many Haredi families using them to record family celebrations – no rabbinical ban was introduced, initially because its usage could be controlled. However, after it was discovered that television programmes could be seen if videos were plugged into computers, Haredi rabbis also banned videos.

More recently, Haredi rabbis have adopted a similar approach to the internet, where the existence of, for example, pornographic websites is seen to present an even greater threat than any of the earlier media forms. The invention of the internet poses myriad dilemmas for the Haredim. But its centrality in twenty-first century life has left these rabbis in a major quandary as to how to ‘tackle’ the danger. The internet not only exposes some Haredim to undesirable content, but also threatens the very essence of the Haredi lifestyle as a cultural enclave. The internet widens the marketplace of religious ideas, weakens rabbinical hierarchies, and threatens religious loyalties. If religion in traditional societies was based upon the authority which was vested in religious bodies, in complex industrial societies there is an increased emphasis upon personal choice when it comes to moral and religious matters, with religious and spiritual issues being increasingly mediated through print and electronic technologies. The mass media has, in effect, become a secondary causal agent in the formation of contemporary religious identities. But while some people unaffiliated with a religious community might use these means, the extent to which traditional media such as the press, radio and television have in practice impacted upon religious identity formations remains unclear. The internet, by providing the surfer both with religious information and enabling him to explore beyond the territory of his current religious beliefs, has potentially a greater role to play.

But by far the biggest question with which the rabbis have failed to grapple is; how to deal with the sexual content of internet websites? Religious leaders raise concerns that the internet provides access to undesirable sites, such as pornographic ones, which are not dissimilar from the perception in the fifteenth century on the part of the Catholic Church of the dire danger which the development of printing posed (Eisenstein 1983). In the Kippa poll, 43 per cent of Haredi surfers said that the internet influenced their religiosity negatively. The ‘Eda Haredit’ (or Committee of Torah Sages, the umbrella group of Haredi rabbis) established a special bet din (or religious law court) of rabbis to deal with questions concerning communications-related matters. The internet was regarded by them as a far greater moral threat than television: whereas television content was monitored, the internet enabled free ac-
cess to pornographic sites. The bet din banned the internet. Drawing upon the biblical edict that ‘the camp shall be holy’ (Deut. 23:15), Judaism believes that the mass media should be characterised by sexual modesty. That the Israelite camp in the Wilderness in ‘which God walked shall be holy . . . that God should not see anything unseemly and turn Himself away from you’ (ibid.) is an allusion to nudity being regarded negatively.

But rabbinical attempts to erect a barrier between internet and their Haredi followers have not been successful. Haredi rabbis have had to face the realisation that the ban on computers and the internet has not been entirely accepted. One survey in 2006 found that 50 per cent of Haredi households possessed a computer at home, in contrast to 90 per cent of secular Israelis (Geotopographica survey, Mercaz Inyanim, 23.5.2006). But only 20 per cent of Haredi households were linked up to the internet. In 2007 according to the government’s Central Bureau for Statistics, 23 per cent of Haredim were linked up to the internet – compared to 92 per cent of secular Jews, 83 per cent of traditional Jews, and 74 per cent of modern Orthodox Jews. Drawing on the hermeneutical standard in Jewish lawmaking (halakhah) of not legalising anything which would not be acceptable to the community (and which would therefore raise questions about the legitimacy of their rabbis and the Torah itself) Haredi rabbis have come to recognise that the internet is an integral factor of the contemporary business world. Some Haredi rabbinical forums, therefore, distinguish between prohibiting the use of the internet at home and allowing Haredi businesses to be linked to it. By only allowing the internet in business premises it was hoped that children would be prevented from surfing the web at home and in an attempt to enforce the ban on the internet, some of the stricter Haredi schools in Israel refuse to accept children from homes which have computers. While most Haredim in Israel adhere to the internet ban, somewhat fewer Haredim outside Israel, notably in the US, are believed to do so.

Parallel to the rabbinical discussions about computers and the internet have been a number of commercial attempts by Haredi entrepreneurs to create computer-filtering programmes. One early attempt, ‘Torahnet’, undertook to process requests for clearance to websites within 24 hours.

Broadly, three approaches could be identified in the discussions of the Haredi rabbinical committee for communications affairs and among other Haredi rabbis. According to a lenient approach, access was given to all internet sites except for those sites known specifically to have problematic content. According to a stricter approach, the content of all sites had to be examined. A disc comprising some 3,000 approved sites was prepared by a Haredi body.
A third approach recognised that different people have different internet needs: a businessman will need access to different sites than those required by, for example, a school principal. Accordingly, each person would submit the sites of which they require access to a computer-screening committee, to approve the contents of each site. This third approach has an in-built contradiction. Moreover, different approaches within the Haredi world means that some Haredi sub-communities are stricter than others; thus Haredim of one community may find themselves given access to sites which are not approved by the rabbis of other Haredi sub-communities.

Haredi opposition to the internet took on wider dimensions which might potentially have affected the entire Israeli population, when in the Israeli Parliament in 2007 the Shas Haredi political party called for a ban on internet servers providing surfers with access to pornographic sites, unless the individual specifically gives his or her approval. No access would be available for anybody aged under 18. Heavy fines, including imprisonment would be imposed on any server providing sex-related content to those people who had not requested it. The law passed its first reading in the Israeli Parliament with 46 votes in favour and 20 against and with all the religious parties as well as the Arab parties supporting it; some other members of the government also gave it their support. The bill floundered after a government committee that examines upcoming parliamentary legislation decided that more pedagogic methods should be used to educate the young about the dangers of internet. In truth, given the overall antipathy felt towards Haredim in the Israeli parliament, the bill might have had better chances had it been initiated by a non-Haredic party.

Haredi leaders faced a new internet challenge with the creation of Facebook. True, Haredim have always emphasised the importance of interpersonal relations, both in terms of family and community. And Facebook did not pose a direct threat in terms of access and exposure to internet sites with sexual content. But social networking did breach the Haredi rules of conduct, notably by providing a platform for building relationships between men and women. It also resulted in the free passage of information and gossip in a society where rabbis have traditionally supervised the information flow – such as through the supervised Haredi daily papers. The free passage of information threatened the grave prohibition of social gossip (loshon hara). The danger of Facebook went further than social gossip, however, because it also created male–female relationships outside the marital sphere. “The development of Facebook is a tragedy. It is not possible that the Haredi community – trained from a young age towards a separation between men and women
— should have a mixed social network,’ said Rabbi Mordechai Blau of the so-called ‘Committee for the Purity and Sanctity of the Camp’ (Kikar Shabbat website). Some members of the community got around rabbinical bans on Facebook by using anonymous names lest they be detected – the penalty for which could involve such social excommunication tactics as threatening a child’s chances of a **shidduch** (literally, an arranged marriage), or of being admitted to a school or **yeshiva**. But like the earlier internet battles, the chances of rabbinical bans against Facebook being wholly accepted throughout the community were limited. Instead, it lay with grassroots Facebook users to themselves develop their own Haredi Facebook code of networking— not dissimilar from the codes which the unofficial Haredi internet websites like ‘Hadrei Haredrim’ produced.

Haredi control over the media was threatened from within the Haredi community by the growth of Haredi news websites. By 2012 a handful of Haredi news websites operated which were independent of rabbinic supervision. These include Kikar Shabbat Haredim, and LaDaat. The websites drew upon the prototype model of www.BeHadrei Haredim (a play on the word Haredim, meaning the inner sanctums [in Hebrew **hadrei**] of the Haredi world), established towards the end of the nineties by journalist David Rottenberg. Originally taking the form of a website forum, appropriately called ‘Hyde Park’, Hadrei Hadarim evolved into an independent news site. By 2008 it had an estimated 6,000 entries an hour. While there were no pictures of women, and aware of the acceptable social limits within the Haredi religio-culturo enclave, the sites were inclined not to subject themselves to the rabbinical censors, who in the case of the Haredi daily press, for example, nightly inspect the following morning’s copy of the newspaper. The news sites print uncensored information about the political infighting within different sections of the Haredi world such as between rival Haredi hassidic communities. At times the information transgressed the prohibitions of **loshon hara**. The sites are forums for expressing criticism – sometimes vehement – of the positions and behaviour of Haredi leaders. In light of the Haredi ban on the internet, some Haredi leaders refuse to be interviewed by the sites, and the names of those sponsoring the sites, and editing them, have been hidden from public view.

The interactive nature of Haredi websites has challenged the exclusivist monopoly which Haredi rabbis have enjoyed among their followers. Indeed, the growing rifts which exist today within the Haredi community between grassroots Haredim and their rabbinical leaders who have failed to grapple with the revolution which computers and internet except by banning it cannot be camouflaged.
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It has also weakened the insularity of the Haredi communities. Whereas in the Haredi newspapers each community newspaper covers their own goings-on – Ashkenazi Haredi or Sephardi Haredi, European Lithuanian or Hassidic, or a specific Hassidic stream – the websites are intra-Haredi in content. In fact, the Haredi websites have – as has the independent Haredi weekly press, which began in the 1980s – contributed, within the confines of the limited resources of the Haredi media, to an in-built competition among Haredi media organisations, and ultimately to greater professionalism.

Challenging the ‘modernity’ of modern orthodoxy

By contrast to Haredi rabbis, the rabbis of the modern Orthodox (dati leumi) stream have not issued legal injunctions against exposure to newspapers, radio and TV, a fact which reflects a broader philosophy of seeking to create a synthesis between Judaism and modernity (Cohen 2005). Yet the internet has nonetheless been a subject of debate within the modern Orthodox community. In contrast to the Haredi’s blanket ban on the internet, the modern Orthodox debate about the issue went even deeper ideologically because by nature they seek to reconcile modernity with Jewish values. Rather than living in a cultural ghetto, modern Orthodox Jews believe in the inherent virtue of living in full harmony with modern technology. Yet given the presence of pornographic material on the internet, they, no less than the Haredim, have been faced with the question of whether to compromise their views about being culturally open in order not to be exposed to it.

Three approaches to the internet have developed inside the modern religious community. The most traditional view concerns media literacy: confidence that the faithful Jew has the self-discipline and maturity not to visit forbidden websites. A more cautious view involves external means of self-discipline. In the case of children or young people, parental supervision of access exercises control by means of the filtering processes. The most extreme position – identified with a subsection of the modern Orthodox Jewish community known as ‘Haredi leumi’ – is one in which the internet is banned in its entirety. The Haredi leumi are characterised, on the one hand, by ideological support for the modern Zionist state and see the Israeli state as a religious act, in contrast with other Haredim who are critical of the state because its establishment should be contingent upon the messianic era, and should be run in accordance to Jewish law. On the other hand, Hardal schools characteristically offer only a limited study of secular topics, and their pupils’ homes do not have televisions. Travel abroad is discouraged.
The debate about the negative impacts of the internet has been complicated even more by consciousness of its pluses. The internet hosts online access to the Torah and other Jewish educational software. Torah databases comprise comprehensive collections of traditional texts from the Bible, bibilical commentaries, Mishnah, the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, and later Jewish codes, covering 3,300 years of Jewish written scholarship. Beyond narrow religious sites, the internet also has other sites of a broader Jewish affiliation, including community news, Israel news, Jewish dating, genealogy (Romm 1998). Usage of the Torah websites has been a feature of the modern Orthodox community, but individuals in the Haredi community have also increasingly recognized their value. The debate within modern Orthodoxy about benefitting from the internet mirrors the broader discussion about media and technology in the literature on media and religion. Whereas technology is generally seen as value-free or neutral, with society choosing how to deploy it, Clifford G. Christians argues that technology is value-oriented, with a perspective on the sacredness of human life. Quoting Jacques Ellul, Christians (2002) critique contemporary society for allowing the power of machines to define social institutions such as politics and medicine – with their technological progress becoming a social goal in itself – and calls on humanity to seize control and channel technological means towards human goals. Thus technological means such as printing, video and computers should be deployed by religious organisations as religious educational tools.

It may be asked whether the view that religion-related websites may serve as a source of religious inspiration for religiously unaffiliated persons (Hoover 1998), as raised at the commencement of this article, is also true in the Israeli Jewish context. Notwithstanding the practical use of websites with community data, there is no evidence in the Israeli Jewish case to support the theory that non-religious Jews look for their religious identities on the internet. According to the Gutman Survey, only 17 per cent of Israeli Jews (2,571 respondents) polled in 2009 surfed the internet for material on the Bible, the Talmud and other Jewish sources. Only 5 per cent of those who are ‘non-religious but not anti-religious’ surf the net ‘a lot’ or ‘considerably’ for Jewish religious information like the Talmud and Bible. Moreover, 0 per cent of non-religious anti-religious said they did so. Just 12 per cent of ‘traditional’ (i.e. non-strictly religious but observe varying degrees of religious ritual) said they did. The Israeli Jewish case, therefore, suggests that contrary to expectations, the internet has little significant impact upon religious identity.

On the other hand, the religious Israeli Jew, the modern Orthodox and even the ultra-Orthodox did do so. Twenty-six per cent of modern religious
or dati leumi Jews surfed the internet for Jewish religious content ‘a lot’ or ‘considerably’. The biggest group was the more intense form of modern Orthodoxy, called Hardal: 41 per cent of Hardal did so a great deal or considerably. This was also noteworthy given the general reservations which Hardal's rabbis have about the internet. The same was true with the Haredim, where despite their rabbis' general ban on the internet, it was surfed for Jewish religious content by 20 per cent of Haredim ‘a lot’ or ‘considerably’. Yet, even this is one of the less significant roles which the internet plays even for religious audiences. It is difficult to evaluate the effect of the internet on religious life. In the above survey, most Orthodox Jews who participated in the Kippa poll, used the internet for electronic mail (25 %), chat (26 %), work (22 %), and following the news (17 %). Only 7 per cent used it for studying Judaism. Asked whether the internet had improved or damaged their religious commitment, 69 per cent of modern Orthodox surfers said there had been no change, 14 per cent said that there had been and for the bad, and 17 per cent for the good (Kippa 2006).

The Gutman Survey of 2009 confirmed the age gap which characterises worldwide patterns of exposure to the internet: surfing for Jewish religious information was done most by the 20–30 age group. Overall, there was a considerable difference between the under-fifties and over-fifties. No difference was found between male and female surfing. It is noteworthy that there was no difference in socio-economic terms between surfers from high-income, average-income, and low-income backgrounds. Another noteworthy difference was between the Sephardi or oriental Jews and the Ashkenazi or European Jews: 14 per cent of Sephardim surfed the internet for Jewish related content in contrast to less than 10 per cent of Ashkenazim.

Another development on the internet is online rabbinical counselling. Rabbis – identified with the modern Orthodox communities – reply to questions on Jewish law and offer counselling. Online counselling exists to a much lesser extent within Haredi communities; most Haredim preferring to consult with their community rabbi, reflecting a strict adherence to rabbinic authority. Online rabbinical counselling has nevertheless generated a debate among modern Orthodox rabbis about the pluses and minuses of the phenomenon. On the one hand, it offers anonymity, which the local community rabbi does not, and in that way enables people to raise questions they perhaps would not otherwise feel comfortable doing. It also offers non-affiliated Jews access to rabbis, which they would not otherwise have. On the other hand, online answers offered by rabbis are too short. When the rabbi is unacquainted with the questioner, personal circumstances cannot be taken into consideration,
even though sometimes the personal circumstances of the questioner can be crucial in particular instances. Instead of accepting the Jewish law decision of one’s own community rabbi, people might be inclined to ‘shop around’ to different online rabbis to find the reply most acceptable and comfortable to them. The ease of online counselling discourages the Jew from studying the original sources in the halakhic literature.

Conclusion

It is early days for evaluating the full implications of the internet upon religious identity. This study found that there is a surprising similarity between all the rabbis – not just Haredim and modern Orthodox – in taking the view that internet is injurious to religious belief. The difference between them is less to do with attitude and more with the practical measures to be taken. Even if the Haredi leadership today recognises that the cultural enclave of old requires certain modifications – with some Haredim going to work and raising their economic lifestyles – the essence of cultural isolationism that characterises Haredim remains. Notwithstanding the wide, ongoing, and, at times, challenging discussions which have taken place among religious communities in Israel over the last fifteen years regarding the danger of the internet, the extent to which it has actually changed religious life should not be exaggerated. Religious life centres around the synagogue, the Jewish home, and Torah study, particularly in the case of the Haredim, but also to a considerable extent for the modern Orthodox Jews. The superior status of traditional Jewish religious values in these religious communities means that media have less influence and are rebuffed by the religious community as it seeks to maintain at all costs its true religious identity. As was the case before the internet era, the synagogue still remains the centre of Jewish spiritual life. If Jewish study has been enhanced through the application of technology such as Torah educational websites, the traditional frameworks of Jewish study such as the rabbi’s shiur (religious lesson), and off-line yeshiva study, remain paramount.

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The achievement of independence in 1948 was in many ways a watershed in Burma’s history. At this time, a variety of Buddhist movements emerged that were part not only of a ‘Burmese Buddhist revival’, in which even the government was involved (see Brohm 1957), but also a general re-enchantment of Asia. In the period following World War II, projects of nation-building and further modernization were implemented in many newly independent Asian nation states. The theories of modernization adopted by the rulers presupposed that a new, rationalized and secularized order that had set them on the path of ‘progress’ would entail a decline of religion. However, instead there was a widespread resurgence of religion, and a variety of new, eclectic religious movements emerged in Southeast Asia (Keyes et al. 1994).1 Charles Keyes, Helen Hardacre, and Laurel Kendall (1994) explain this phenomenon as being related to a ‘modern crisis of authority’ which was brought about as a result of the tensions between these movements and the modernization and nation building projects.

In the thriving religious field of postcolonial Burma, two lay Buddhist movements associated with two different meditation techniques emerged, viz.; the insight meditation movement and the concentration meditation movement. The latter consisted of a variety of esoteric congregations combining concentration meditation with esoteric lore, and some of these were characterized by fundamentalist trends.2 At the same time, the supermuni-

1 Among these movements can be mentioned Cao Dai in Vietnam and Dhammakāya, Santi Asoke, and the Hupphaasawan Movement in Thailand (Keyes et al. 1994, Schober 1995); some of these movements were fundamentalist Buddhist movements (see Swearer 1991; see also Foxeus 2011).

2 The most important features of the ‘esoteric style’ of the esoteric congregations are initiation rituals, the master–disciple (hsuyà–tapyi) relationship, and secrecy. The latter may refer to genuine secrets that should remain hidden due to sociopolitical conditions, but is mainly concerned with the social dynamics of a rhetoric of secrecy, and serves to a large degree as a proselytizing strategy (see Foxeus 2011: 3–10). Secrecy in the latter sense should, following Hugh B. Urban (1998), be understood less in terms of its content than of its forms. Being employed as a discursive strategy, it ‘transforms a given piece of knowledge into a scarce and precious resource’, and
A dane form of Buddhism became increasingly influential in the entire field of religion. The aim of the present article is to discuss how this supermundane dimension has reshaped the complex religious field in Burma, with particular emphasis on the esoteric congregations; to present the Burmese form of esoteric Theravāda Buddhism, and to situate the fundamentalist trends which are present in these contexts.

**The Liberation Era: enlightenment and weizzāhood for anyone**

In pre-modern Burma, it was generally regarded as impossible to attain the higher stages of the path to nirvana and enlightenment because the Buddha's sāsana was perceived as being too degenerated. From the mid-eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the view that it was possible to attain nirvana as a Buddhist saint (P. arahant) in the present era gradually developed and spread (see Pranke 2011, Turner 2009, Braun 2008). In early postcolonial Burma, there was a general expectation of the possibility for anyone to achieve soteriological success on the path to enlightenment and nirvana, and this was associated with a seemingly novel notion, viz. the Liberation Era (wimoutti-yuga-khayt) that was popular at the time, at least in some communities.

Different cosmological schemes seem to have been used by Burmese people to make sense of changes brought about in the colonial and post-colonial periods respectively. At the end of the nineteenth century, a linear scheme of gradual sāsana decline in five stages, as Alicia Turner (2009) has demonstrated, became popular among Buddhist lay associations and served as a conceptual framework to interpret and explain the crisis of the perceived decline of Buddhism under colonialism. Such a scheme is inherently pessimistic since the sāsana is explained as undergoing a gradual and inevitable

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3 Sāsana – ‘instruction’ – refers to ‘Buddhism’ as it is grounded in society: monks, texts, pagodas, monasteries, relics, Buddhist learning and practice, and so forth. Reflecting how this notion is generally understood in Theravāda Buddhist countries, Heinz Bechert (1970: 762n3) defines it as ‘the totality of the Buddhist institutions in a lawful unbroken succession from the time of the Buddha onwards’.

4 In this article, ‘P.’ is an abbreviation for Pāli. All foreign words are Burmese, unless otherwise indicated. The term ‘nirvana’ will be used instead of the Pāli nibbāna, since the former word has been adopted into English as a loan word.
Esoteric Theravāda Buddhism in Burma/Myanmar
decline. While that scheme is supported by the Pāli commentarial literature, the cyclical scheme of the Liberation Era appears not to be. Around the 1940s, many Burmese envisioned Gotama Buddha’s period as an auspicious Liberation Era, a time when it was exceedingly easy to attain enlightenment and nirvana. It was widely expected that this era would return in 1957, the first year of the second half of the Buddhist era (see Houtman 1990, Foxeus 2011). This view therefore reflected the optimism among Burmese Buddhists regarding the new political situation of an independent Burma. It was expected that the Buddha’s sāsana would flourish, and many events during this period could be seen as a confirmation of that. For instance, the celebration of the 2,500-year anniversary of the Buddha’s final nirvana was held in 1956; a ’Buddhist revival’ was carried out by the parliamentarian government led by Prime Minister U Nu, involving events such as the Sixth Buddhist Synod in 1954–6, and Buddhist lay associations strove to bring about of flourishing of Buddhism (see Brohm 1957). The cyclical view of sāsana decline could thus be said to have served as a conceptual scheme by which the Burmese people could explain, interpret, and make sense of their contemporary situation.

Furthermore, the different views of the meaning of the Liberation Era seem to correspond to the interests of two predominantly lay Buddhist movements in the post-independence period: the insight meditation (P . vipassanā) movement and the concentration meditation (P . samatha, samādhi) movement. Accordingly, the Liberation Era was envisioned by some as the Vipassanā Era, the ’Era of Insight Meditation’ (see Foxeus 2011). It was widely assumed that it was now possible to attain enlightenment and nirvana in a single lifetime, or at least attain the lower stages of that path; the cult of living Buddhist saints (P . arahant) reached its peak in these years (see Pranke 2011), and a mass meditation movement practising insight meditation emerged and was supported by the state (see Brohm 1957; Houtman 1990, 1999; Jordt 2007). Ingrid Jordt (2007) has referred to this lay Buddhist movement as the ’New Laity’. On the other hand, some esoteric communities envisioned the Liberation Era as the ’Great Weizzā Era’, at which time it would be easier to attain success on the path of esoteric knowledge and become a semi-immortal, accomplished

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5 The linear scheme was originally outlined by Buddhaghosa in his commentary Manorathapūraṇi to the Aṅguttara Nikāya (see Turner 2009, Foxeus 2011).

6 The cyclical scheme comprised five stages, as follows: 1) the Liberation Era, 2) the Era of Concentration Meditation, 3) the Era of Suttas, 4) the Era of Buddhist Precepts, and 5) the Donation Era (see Houtman 1990, Foxeus 2011).

7 With regard to this movement, Gustaaf Houtman (1999: 8) therefore spoke of a democratization of enlightenment (on the path to arahanthood).
esoteric master by practising Gandhāra lore combined with concentration meditation (see Foxeus 2011). In this way, the concept of the Liberation Era, in its two versions, could provide legitimacy for two different soteriological orientations. The state – especially the parliamentarian government led by Prime Minister U Nu – supported the insight meditation movement, while the semi-military, socialist government (BSPP) under General Ne Win suppressed the esoteric congregations in the early 1980s (see Tosa 1996, Foxeus 2011, Pranke 2011).

The supermundane Ariya discourse in the field of religion in contemporary Burma

The main currents of the religious field in Burma are, roughly; ‘traditional’ mainstream Buddhism, supported by the state and the Buddhist lay people; the Buddhist esoteric congregations; and the spirit cults (nat), whose religious specialists are female and male spirit mediums, or nat kadaws – ‘wives of the spirits’. The esoteric congregations are situated hierarchically somewhere in between the mainstream Buddhism and the nat cults. Moreover, we should add at least two varieties of ‘modern’ Buddhism: rational modern Buddhism, which to a large degree corresponds to the popular insight meditation movement, and esoteric modern Buddhism, which corresponds to some esoteric congregations in the concentration meditation movement (see Foxeus, forthcoming). However, the reality is not as neat as this picture might suggest, and there are many overlaps, tensions, and interlinkages between the various currents and established forms of the religion. Moreover, these segments or subfields do not only stand in hierarchical relationships to one another, but also form hierarchies internally.

The versions of Buddhism associated with the monastic community are generally ascribed greater authority, and represent different facets of an ideology with a more or less hegemonic status in Burmese society. Being naturalized, its privileged status is taken for granted (see Brac de la Perrière 2009a). These facets are mainly constituted by traditional mainstream Buddhism and rational modern Buddhism (cf. Gravers 2012, Schober 2011). In Burma, just as in other Theravāda Buddhist countries, the varieties of modern Buddhism

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8 For more on the concept of weizzāl/weizzādhour and the Gandhāra lore, see below. For a comparison of these two movements, see Foxeus, forthcoming.
9 For more on hierarchies among the nat cults, see Brac de la Perrière 2009b.
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emerged in response to colonization and modernization in the nineteenth century (see Lopez 2002, Braun 2008, Houtman 1990, Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1990, King 2002, Kirichenko 2009). The most typical and well-known form of modern Buddhism is the rationalist version, which is strongly informed by a Protestant model of religion and emphasizes doctrines, antiritualism, canonical texts, and religious experience, and which is regarded as compatible with Western science; it downplays supernatural powers and the miraculous and mythological dimensions of Buddhism. Moreover, rational modern Buddhism represents an adaptation to modernity and Western post-Enlightenment rationality. In response to criticism raised by Protestant missionaries against Buddhist ‘superstition’ in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some scholastic monks, especially Ledi Hsayādaw (1846–1923), presented Buddhism as a kind of rational philosophy, claimed to be not merely compatible with Western science, but superior to it and to Christianity. Ledi Hsayādaw emphasized the relevance of a doctrinal form of Buddhism for the Buddhist laity (see Braun 2008, Kirichenko 2009). Accordingly, he disseminated to the lay people a simplified version of what had previously been the prerogative of the elite community among the monks, viz. sophisticated and intricate Abhidhamma philosophy and insight meditation. He was the first person to organize lay people in the study of the Abhidhamma, and created lay groups to this end throughout Burma. In the idiom of modern Buddhism, this study would enable the Buddhist laity to make spiritual progress ‘in this very life’ (Braun 2008: 295). This rational and doctrinal form of Buddhism was initially popular among the emerging middle-classes in Burma, and a comparable development occurred in Sri Lanka during the same period (see Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1990). It was not until the early post-independence period, starting in 1948, that the two currents of Buddhist meditation turned into large-scale movements.

10 Traditional mainstream Buddhism presupposes a clear and unambiguous divide between the monastic community and the Buddhist laity; it stresses the merit-making activities of the Buddhist lay people, especially giving alms to the monks, and the observance of a few Buddhist precepts. This is Buddhism as sāsana – that is to say, as grounded in society and as a social fact. Modern Buddhism, by contrast, is ‘Buddhism’ as a bhāthā, a ‘religion’, viz. as informed by the Protestant model, emphasizing a set of doctrines, and able to be separated from its social context (see Kirichenko 2009, Houtman 1990, see also Brac de la Perrière 2009a).

11 For more on the history of insight meditation in Burma, see Pranke 2011.
In contemporary Burma, especially in urban areas, rational modern Buddhism is very influential, and is manifested in what I elsewhere (Foxeus, forthcoming) have referred to as the *ariya* discourse, a ‘discourse on the noble.’ This discourse is coextensive with the supermundane (*P. lokuttara*) dimension of Buddhism, and is contrasted with the mundane dimension (*P. lokiya*). The latter is concerned with worldly matters such as luck, protection, success in life, curing ills and afflictions, and acquiring supernatural powers (cf. Tosa 1996). While the supermundane dimension is typically perceived as a superior form of Buddhism, the mundane is at best viewed as a lower form of Buddhism, or even as non-Buddhist. The practices of the esoteric congregations are mainly concerned with this mundane dimension. The supermundane dimension, as articulated in the *ariya* discourse, emphasizes ‘doctrines’ extracted from the canonical texts, Abhidhamma, and the practice of insight meditation, both by the monks and the lay people. Linked to the expectations concerning the soteriological prospects opened by the Liberation Era, the early postcolonial period was sometimes envisioned as the *Ariyā Weizzā* Era – the ‘Era of Noble Knowledge’ (see Foxeus 2011). The gradual noble path (*P. ariyamagga*) to enlightenment and nirvana is typically understood in terms of the four noble truths, the three characteristics of existence, the eightfold path, the practice of meditation, and the four noble ones (*P. ariyapuggala*) who attain various degrees of enlightenment, viz. the stream-entrant, once-returner, never-returner, and the Buddhist saint (*P. arahant*). The last of these has attained nirvana, and the highest possible form of enlightenment for the Buddha’s disciples, viz. his ‘hearers’ (*P. sāvaka*). This path is what Ledi Hsayâdaw (1985: 293) refers to as *ariyā-weizzā* (*P. ariyavijjā*), the ‘noble knowledge’, in his well-known *Vijjāmagga Dīpanī*, ‘Explanation of the Path to Knowledge’. It could be added that this form of Buddhism is similar to what could be called ‘textbook Buddhism’, that is, a simplified, doctrinal form of Buddhism as described in the introductory books on Buddhism which are typified by Walpola Rahula’s seminal book *What the Buddha Taught*, originally published in 1959. From the point of view of this *ariya* discourse, even traditional mainstream Buddhism may be downgraded (see Houtman 1990, Foxeus 2011).

In Theravāda Buddhism, this supermundane *ariya* path was originally intended for the ordained, viz. monks and nuns, but in contemporary Burma

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12 In this scheme, meditation today is almost exclusively understood as the insight meditation (*P. vipassanā*) which may be practised at the meditation centres found throughout Burma.
many lay people have embarked on this path. In the early postcolonial period, insight meditation was favoured by the urban middle-classes, but has later spread to people from all social strata (see Brohm 1957, Jordt 2007). This form of supermundane Buddhism is therefore frequently regarded as being situated at the top of the hierarchy, and the nat cults at the bottom. Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière (2009a) has even described the latter as having a subaltern status, disparaged by both Burmese Buddhists and Western scholars alike.

In contrast to the insight meditation movement, the esoteric congregations emphasized the practice of concentration meditation, which has been ascribed a more dubious Buddhist identity (see Houtman 1990). This movement attracted people of various backgrounds – the middle-classes, politicians, peasants, etc. – but it could be conjectured that the lower strata in society dominated. Both of these soteriological movements consisted predominantly of the Buddhist laity, and represented different versions of modern Buddhism in the sense of being communities of lay Buddhists who have embarked on the path to enlightenment and nirvana, emphasize the practice of meditation to this end, and expect immediate results (see Foxeus, forthcoming). As noted above, I have referred to these forms of Buddhism as rational modern Buddhism and esoteric modern Buddhism. These two forms of lay Buddhism have tended to blur the boundaries between the monastic community and the Buddhist lay people, thereby entailing a ‘monasticization’ of the laity (see Houtman 1990, Turner 2009).

In contemporary Burma, the *ariya* discourse serves, at least in urban areas, as the measure of normative Buddhist values. The lower segments in the hierarchy of the religious field tend to appropriate elements from the supermundane *ariya* discourse as a discursive strategy – or a rhetorical strategy – for acquiring legitimacy, authority, status, and respectability. In post-independence Burma, there seems to have been an increasing tendency to emphasize this supermundane dimension of Buddhism. The esoteric con-

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13 Mahāsi Hsayādaw’s insight meditation technique has remained the most popular technique in postcolonial Burma, and goes back to Mingun Hsayādaw (1869–1954) (see Braun 2008: 396–7; Houtman 1990; Jordt 2007).

14 Here ‘discourse’ refers mainly to the ‘official’ presentation of a congregation, in its books as well as by its leaders and some members; it does not necessarily entail that the practice of the members is informed by it, although it can have that implication.

15 The popularity of the insight meditation movement is not the only evidence for the increasing stress on the supermundane dimension; the latter is rather a tendency that pervades the entire religious field. The intervention of the state in the affairs of the Sangha in the early 1980s followed that line (see Schober 2011). Keiko Tosa (2006: 2) maintains that new esoteric congregations tend to underscore a supermundane
gregations are ascribed higher status in proportion to the degree of their assimilation of the *ariya* discourse. The variegated esoteric congregations in particular have been competing with one another over claims to authority, and their success is directly related to the degree to which they have – or claim to have – incorporated the *ariya* discourse into their tenets and practices (cf. Tosa 1996, 2006). However, as Tosa (1996: 242) observes, in some strategic uses of the Burmese words for the supermundane (*lawkuttara*) and mundane (*lawki*) the exact meanings of these words are not always important.\footnote{16}

The esoteric congregations which have been accorded the highest status are therefore those defining themselves as supermundane congregations and displaying a high degree of *ariya* discourse incorporation. Those with the lowest status, and with the correspondingly lowest degree of assimilation of this discourse, are the mundane, so-called Gandhāra congregations (see below). Dialogue, in terms of mutual exchange, does occur between esoteric currents, and to a certain extent between lower esoteric congregations and the *nat* cults (see Brac de la Perrière 2012). While the supermundane congregations tend to exclude the lower *nats* (the 37 Lords, etc.) altogether, but incorporate the Buddhist gods (*P. deva*) known from the Pāli texts, the lower mundane congregations tend to include both (see Tosa 1996, 2006; Foxeus 2011).\footnote{17} At the same time, representatives of rational modern Buddhism, monastic and lay, tend to criticize the esoteric congregations (see Houtman 1990, Patton 2012), especially those of the Gandhāra kind, which are closer to the *nat* cults at the bottom of the hierarchy. The *nat* cult represents the main ‘Other’ in relation to which those who perceive themselves as representing ‘authentic’ Buddhism define and differentiate themselves (cf. Brac de la Perrière 2009a).\footnote{18} In this sense, the *nat* cults are indispensable for such identity strategies. Moreover, I agree with Brac de la Perrière (2009a: 188) that all the segments of the religious field, which are distinguished in terms of orientation. Buddhicizing trends have grown since the 1950s (see Bekker 1989), and have recently entailed situations where many spirit mediums have switched to being mediums of the accomplished Buddhist esoteric masters (see Brac de la Perrière 2012).

\footnote{16} For instance, some representatives of esoteric congregations may claim to be supermundane as a way to say that they are pious or true Buddhists while maintaining that some other congregations are too mundane as a way of criticizing them (see Tosa 1996: 242).

\footnote{17} For more on the *nats*, see Spiro 1996.

\footnote{18} For more on the relationship between the esoteric cults and the *nat* cults, see Brac de la Perrière 2012.
organization, religious/ritual specialists, tenets and practices, and so forth, are ‘part of the overarching framework of Burmese Buddhism’.

**Burmese esoteric Theravāda Buddhism**

Let us take a phenomenological view of the notions, practices, and forms of organization of esoteric Buddhism, particularly in contemporary Burma. The practices and notions of the esoteric path represent a curious, creative synthesis or hybrid of a range of sources, such as Theravāda Buddhism, (Indian) alchemy, Daoism (see Pranke 2011), and local practices and concepts. Some of these concepts and practices are shared with other countries in Southeast Asia, such as Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia (see Crosby 2000). In general, the esoteric congregations represent the most flexible, hybrid, and variegated segment of the Burmese religious field. This could partially be explained by the prevalence of charismatic authority being ascribed to the cult leaders, which tends to enable innovations, as well as the supernatural sources of authority represented by the accomplished esoteric masters. It is the latter to whom we will now turn.

The Burmese word *weizzādhour* (often abbreviated as *weizzā*) is derived from the Pāli *vijjādhara*, ‘bearer of knowledge’, ‘expert in crafts’, etc., and will henceforth be glossed as ‘accomplished esoteric master’. In contemporary Burma, the path of esoteric knowledge (*weizzā-lan:* ) represents an alternative soteriology by which final extinction and enlightenment (*P. bodhi*) as a Buddhist saint or a buddha can ultimately be attained. A mundane accomplished esoteric master is a Buddhist layman or a monk who has attained success in various mundane arts or crafts, typically the Gandhāra lore, and has thereby acquired supernatural powers (*P. siddhi*) such as being able to fly, to be present in two places at the same time, to materialize objects, to predict the future, and so forth.²⁰ This practice is combined with Buddhist morality (*P. sīla*), concentration meditation, and occasionally the observance of vegetarianism. Moreover, to attain success a practitioner should receive instruc-

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¹⁹ The presentation of the esoteric currents below is based on my own material (see also Foxeus 2011). For other discussions of this phenomenon, see Mendelson 1961a, 1961b, 1963; Ferguson and Mendelson 1981; Pranke 1995, 2011; Rozenberg 2010a, 2010b.

²⁰ In Burma, the ‘Gandhāra lore’ (*P. gandhārī-vijjā*) usually comprises alchemy based on mercury or iron, esoteric squares, syllabic figures, and medicine (with mantras sometimes being added to this category).
tions from a cult leader, usually through initiation into an esoteric congregation, and/or from an accomplished esoteric master in dreams or during meditation. The latter is a kind of supernormal cognition that is usually referred to as ‘hearing and seeing’ (akyā-amyin).

An accomplished esoteric master has undergone an ontological transmutation by which his (for he is invariably a male) lifespan has been immensely prolonged, and he has thereby exited the round of rebirth. Two varieties of this transmutation, or ‘reaching the place of exit’ (htwek-yap-pauk), are distinguished: ‘going out alive’ (ashin-htwek) and ‘going out [apparently] dead’ (athay-htwek). In the former case, typically represented by Bho Bho Aung, the accomplished esoteric master exits the round of rebirth with his mind and body intact. While absorbed in meditation the practitioner may, for instance, suddenly disappear from view and leave his clothes behind. In the latter case, of which one example is Bho Min Khaung, his living consciousness is separated from the body. Having attained the transmutation, the accomplished esoteric master leaves for a hidden abode – typically Mahāmyaing, the ‘Great Forest’, or the slopes of Himalaya, etc. – which only accomplished esoteric masters can see and enter. From such abodes the esoteric masters can communicate with their disciples; they can leave the abode temporarily to enter the human world and possess a human, or they may appear in visual form as apparitions before their disciples to deliver a message or give them orders. In some rare cases, an accomplished esoteric master may even possess a human more or less permanently, thereby making a human body his new embodiment (see Mendelson 1961a, 1961b; Spiro 1982; Foxeus 2011). Having prolonged his lifespan, the accomplished esoteric master will be able to remain in one and the same existence until he attains enlightenment and nirvana as a Buddhist saint or a buddha in the remote future.

In many esoteric congregations in Burma, the myth of the appearance of the Phantom Buddha and the nirvana of Gotama Buddha’s relics at the end of the Buddhist era is very popular. In contrast to the Pāli commentarial tradition (Buddhaghosa), the Burmese version of this cosmic drama is associated with a soteriological eschatology, in the sense that it will provide the last auspicious opportunity for accomplished esoteric masters to attain enlightenment and nirvana as Buddhist saints (see Spiro 1982, Pranke 1995, Foxeus 2011). Other semi-immortal accomplished esoteric masters seek to

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21 In the Theravāda commentarial tradition, Gotama Buddha’s final extinction (P. parinibbāṇa) is divided into three stages: 1) ‘extinction of the impurities’ (P. kilesa), which he attained at the time of the enlightenment, 2) ‘extinction of the mental and
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attain nirvana when Arimetteyya Buddha arrives. Still other accomplished esoteric masters have embarked on the path to buddhahood, and will fare on during innumerable lives until they attain buddhahood (see Pranke 1995, 2011; Foxeus 2011).

An accomplished esoteric master does not only seek to achieve his own personal salvation, but is essentially regarded as a champion of Buddhism and its adherents. Like the Burmese kings, he should work ceaselessly to carry out his duties to promote and defend the Buddha’s sāsana, on the one hand, and to save all beings, on the other. In this latter duty, he assumes the role of a compassionate bodhisatta, a ‘future buddha’, who saves the beings from suffering, both in the here and now and ultimately. In the former case, he (or an intermediary) typically alleviates their suffering in terms of afflictions caused by supernatural agencies, such as evil spirits, witches, sorcerers, etc. by means of exorcism; and in the latter case, he helps them to achieve release from the round of rebirth.

The majority of the still existing esoteric congregations seem to have been established during the late colonial and early postcolonial eras (1940s–60s), respectively (see Tosa 1996, 2006). An esoteric (weizzā) congregation (gain) is founded either by a person who is considered to have attained complete weizzāhood himself or by a person who is able to receive messages and instructions from an accomplished esoteric master operating from a hidden dimension. The esoteric congregations may range from small, loosely organized cult groups with only a few adherents to large-scale congregations with thousands of members.

The accomplished esoteric masters may also transfer power and knowledge to their disciples, either from afar or through possession. This process is called dhāt-sī, being ‘ridden by power’ (or dhāt-kein, etc.). As for possession,
a cult leader – male or female – may temporarily transform into an accomplished esoteric master, acquiring his supernatural powers and knowledge. In this way, the esoteric cults mediate between the spirit cults and mainstream Buddhism, and thus represent something in between the two. In a sense, these esoteric cults represent a kind of Buddhicized spirit cult; that is, the idiom of the spirit mediums is appropriated in a context that is defined as Buddhist by practitioners themselves. In addition, this hybrid is perceived as more acceptable and legitimate by some urban, middle-class Buddhists. However, the concomitant blurring of boundaries may risk undermining not merely the Buddhist identity but also the status, authority, and respectability of the esoteric cults. Some urban cult leaders today therefore tend to maintain that accomplished esoteric masters never possess their disciples, thereby establishing a distinct boundary vis-à-vis the nat cults.

The better-organized congregations require initiation before providing access to their tenets, practices, and books. Through esoteric initiation rituals, in the idiom of transmitting esoteric 'knowledge' (P. paññā), the initiate acquires supernatural powers (P. siddhi) and potencies by means of tattoos, esoteric diagrams (in, sama) inscribed with syllables or numbers, power-transfer by slapping the initiate’s hands, and recitation of texts; sometimes the initiation master serves as a mediator between the accomplished esoteric masters and the initiate, transferring powers from the former to the latter. Through the initiation rituals, the initiate is authorized to serve as an exorcist and to initiate others. For instance, the popular esoteric congregation Shway Yin Kyaw Gain has nine initiation levels. The initiates are tattooed with ‘medicine’ of a red colour, saturated with supernatural powers, which is said to have been produced by the congregation’s accomplished esoteric masters. The tattoos of various Buddhist motifs are inscribed on various parts of the upper body, but the colour disappears after some time. Moreover, the initiate ingests water-containing ash from burnt esoteric diagrams (sama) inscribed on paper. Women are only allowed to be initiated up to the fifth, while men can reach the higher levels and be entrusted with a tattooing instrument (a long pointed
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stick of metal) and medicine, and thereby become authorized to initiate new members. Both women and men can nevertheless serve as exorcists to alleviate disturbances or afflictions (payawga) instigated by supernatural agencies such as evil spirits, etc.27 All esoteric congregations offer healing by means of exorcism which is a way of saving the beings, and combating such evil is a way of protecting Buddhism in the world. Moreover, esoteric congregations may offer clients not only exorcism but also healing with traditional medicine.28

It is frequently thought that members’ wishes can be granted by the specific accomplished esoteric masters linked to the esoteric congregations (see Foxeus 2011). Moreover, members can learn certain tenets and practices in order to acquire supernatural powers and to attain enlightenment and nirvana. Smaller cult groups that do not require initiation may offer some of the above-mentioned felicities, but may also provide counselling regarding business or family problems, exams, and so forth. Such services are similar to those provided by the spirit mediums (naitkadow) of the nat cults. For these and other reasons, the cult groups are in general ranked lower than the better organized congregations, and evince more affinity to the nat cults.

The historical, pre-colonial background of esoteric Theravāda Buddhism in Burma remains to be investigated. According to John P. Ferguson and Michael E. Mendelson (1981: 74), the cult of the accomplished esoteric masters – as it is known today – represents a relatively late development in Burmese Buddhism, and should be understood as having originated as a ‘symbolic reaction to the shock of colonization’.29 In canonical, commentarial, and apocryphal Pāli texts, as well as in local Burmese texts from the eighteenth century onward, the weizzādhour is sometimes portrayed as a martial figure holding a sword and furnished with supernatural powers, such as being able to fly in the sky (see Foxeus 2011). Given the sense of threat Burmese people felt regarding the survival of Buddhism under British colonialism in the late nineteenth century (see Turner 2009, Braun 2008), it is not surprising that the powerful figure of vijjādhara, armed with weapons, was partly utilized as an anti-colonial figure, and a protector of Buddhism and local traditions. That

27 For more on esoteric initiation rituals and exorcism, see Foxeus 2011, Rozenberg 2012, Spiro 1996.
28 For more on exorcism and healing, see Tosa 2006, Foxeus 2011, Rozenberg 2012. For more on Shway Yin Kyaw Gain and initiation rituals, see Rozenberg 2012, Foxeus 2011.
29 No convincing evidence has yet been presented to disprove their thesis. For a different hypothesis about the origin of this phenomenon in Indian Mahāsiddha cults, see Pranke 2011.
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was particularly the case with the figure of Sekyā Min, the world emperor (see below).

The esoteric congregations with the explicit purpose of maintaining and propagating the Buddha's sāsana seem to have emerged *ad hoc* as a response to the British colonization of Burma, and its abolition of the monarchy in 1885. The colonization dissolved the symbiotic relationship which had existed between the king and the monastic community and represented the Asokan model’s two wheels of the Dhamma. According to that model, the king had a duty to promote and maintain Buddhism, and offer the monastic community lavish gifts. Moreover, the kings of Burma were considered to be bodhisattas and were bestowed the title of a cakkavattin (sekyā-min:), viz. a world emperor. As a response to the British colonization, a variety of Buddhist lay associations emerged from the late nineteenth century onwards. Perceiving Buddhism to be in danger due to the colonization of the country by non-Buddhist foreigners, these associations sought to assume the responsibility to maintain and promote the Buddha’s sāsana in the absence of a king (see Turner 2009). As we have seen, another kind of Buddhist lay organization also emerged during this period, viz. a number of esoteric (weizzā) congregations which likewise sought to support and maintain Buddhism. Some of the esoteric congregations founded in the early post-independence period were characterized by nationalist and fundamentalist trends, and it is to one of these we will now turn.

**The ariyā-weizzā organization: fundamentalist Buddhism**

Colonial powers introduced modernization projects in the colonies which continued in the independent states, and fundamentalist movements later emerged as a reaction to the modern predicament (see Marty and Appleby 1991a, 1991b; Swearer 1991). Using religion as a source of identity is frequently considered the hallmark of fundamentalist movements (see Marty and Appleby 1991a, 1991b; Swearer 1991). The ariyā-weizzā organization fulfils most of the criteria that Donald K. Swearer outlines for fundamentalist Theravāda Buddhist movements in South and Southeast Asia, such as

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30 The diversity of fundamentalist movements has led scholars to speak of similarities between these variegated and heterogeneous phenomena in terms of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s concept of ‘family resemblances’ (Marty and Appleby 1991a). Alternatively, we could refer to a set of polythetic criteria to cover this diversity (see Foxeus 2011).
Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke in Thailand. Such movements represent a negative or even aggressive response to modernization; they display a quest for identity (individual, national, and communal); their search for identity assumes the character of a ‘return to the roots’, viz. restoring a primordial condition of unity, certainty, and purity; they have strong, often militantly aggressive, charismatic leaders whose followers perceive themselves to be under threat – as individuals, a community, or a nation; they may have an almost obsessive sense of their unique role or destiny, and can be millenarian in nature; etc. (Swearer 1991: 678, 633; see also Foxeus 2011, 2012). Moreover, these movements are typically characterized by a nationalism based on religious identity which must be protected against foreign influences, such as postcolonial modernity (see Swearer 1991). As a nationalist slogan of the early twentieth century stated, ‘To be a Burmese is to be a Buddhist.’ That is, Buddhism has been the main medium through which individual, local, and national identity have been forged. This quest for identity is a focal concern in the ariyā-weizzā organization which sought to restore the pre-colonial aristocratic or royal Buddhism, thereby fostering a royal identity among the members. While rationalist modern Buddhism tends to affirm modernization and Western rationality, fundamentalist movements are negative towards it and reject it.

**Sekyā Min: an anti-colonial hero**

Throughout most of the colonial era, the figure of Sekyā Min (P. cakkavattin), the world emperor, mainly represented anti-colonial resistance, and a series of rebellions against the British colonizers were led by people claiming to be this mysterious personage. In postcolonial Burma, millenarian expectations of his return were held in many communities. Sekyā Min was expected to establish a Buddhist utopia of material abundance; for instance, there would be plenty of gold, silver, and rice, and Buddhism would flourish (see Foxeus 2011, Sarkisyanz 1965). According to one prophecy, when Sekyā Min arrives he will ride on an elephant, his queen will ride on another elephant, and a third elephant will carry a Tipiṭaka (see Foxeus 2011). Sekyā Min will thus arrive together with his queen to restore both the monarchy and the authentic form of Buddhism, as represented by the Tipiṭaka. Some esoteric congregations...
tions were founded by individuals believed to be embodiments of this millenarian figure, who was considered to be a powerful accomplished esoteric master, a righteous king (P. dhammarāja) and a bodhisatta. These congregations typically combined royal symbolism, insignia, pretensions, and conduct, on the one hand, and esoteric notions and practices, on the other. I have referred to these as ‘royal esoteric congregations’. After a long period of colonization, the royal esoteric congregations aimed to ‘restore’, at least in a minimalist manner, the monarchy that had been abolished by the British in 1885 (see Foxeus 2011, 2012).

The religious currents in early postcolonial Burma were a response not only to the disenchantment with the state’s projects of modernization and nation building, but also to the ongoing impact of the previous colonial period. Such vestiges of colonialism were frequently viewed as a threat, as undermining or contaminating the indigenous culture and Buddhism (see Houtman 1990, Foxeus 2011). The influence of the colonial legacy and the prevalence of Westernizing trends in early post-independence Burma led Michael Aung-Thwin (1989) to speak of ‘Burma’s myth of independence’ or its ‘pseudo independence’ at the time. To gain ‘real’ independence, he explains, it was necessary to purge Burma of its colonial past so that the people could recover their lost identity (Aung-Thwin 1989).

Accordingly, the influx of Western and other foreign ideologies was sometimes perceived as a threat to the survival of Buddhism in postcolonial Burma. Some esoteric congregations, especially the ariyā-weizzā organization, used military terminology and titles to underscore the gravity of their mission to defend and support Buddhism, which had been the traditional duty of the Burmese kings. Furthermore, Sekyā Min was expected to inaugurate the Liberation Era, a Buddhist millennium in which it was expected that Buddhism would flourish, Burma would be peaceful, and the foreign ideologies would be expelled.

The fundamentalism of the ariyā-weizzā organization is partly concerned with some extreme and nationalist features in its ideology. It sought to revive

33 English was still the lingua franca in higher education, etc., and Western projects of modernity were dominant in the areas of the economy, politics, culture, law, etc.

34 For instance, in the 1970s and 1980s, the founder of the ariyā-weizzā organization conferred military titles on the leaders, and they constituted an ‘army’. Filled with a ‘spirit of patriotism’, they were to protect the Buddha’s sāsana and their culture, traditions, country, nationality/race, etc., irrespective of whatever dangers they might encounter, and were not to hesitate to sacrifice their lives in their work for Buddhism (see Foxeus 2011, 2012).
the royal traditions and the pre-colonial form of Buddhism, at least as they were perceived in the early postcolonial period. For the members of the ariyā-weizzā organization, the pre-colonial form of Buddhism in combination with esoteric notions and practices mainly served as important sources of identity at a time when Buddhism and local traditions were perceived as being threatened by foreign influences. Furthermore, the members were constituted as the Great Elect, and represented a moral, millenarian, royal, and nationalist community, with the responsibility of safeguarding the survival of Buddhism in the face of the threat of the forces of secularism and modernization in post-colonial Burma. As an implicit criticism of some other forms of Buddhism in post-independence Burma it claimed to represent ‘authentic Buddhism’. I have argued that the ariyā-weizzā organization constituted an opposition – a counter-discourse – to the prevailing socio-political conditions (in U Nu’s Burma and especially during the Ne Win years), and a criticism of the place of Buddhism in society in post-independence Burma (see Foxeus 2011).

Since the 1950s, the ariyā-weizzā organization in Burma has waged a Buddhist ‘war’ against what it perceives to be the enemies of Buddhism. The alleged conflict between Buddhism and its enemies is perceived as a cosmic battle between good and evil, righteousness and unrighteousness, dhamma and adhamma. The enemies are here mainly to be understood as foreign, Western ideologies, errant religions, such as Islam, as well as errant governments, and so forth. Although the esoteric organization’s discourses on the cosmic battle against the destructive forces are framed in military terminology and the rhetoric of militancy, the ‘battle’ is mainly fought by members seated in a cross-legged position in pagodas performing ritual violence. Members employ solely supernatural weapons and rituals in their battle. Whether or not there is a battle, and if it has claimed any victims, however, is a matter of belief. The ariyā-weizzā organization is, in fact, just as anti-colonial and anti-Western as the anti-colonial rebellions during the British era, but its battle has taken on cosmic proportions and is waged by supernatural means (Foxeus 2011, 2012).

The ariya discourse in the ariya-weizzā organization
Traditional esoteric congregations are not primarily concerned with soteriology but are typically limited to the apotropaic dimension of Buddhism, such as exorcism and traditional medicine. For instance, the mundane Gandhāra congregation Shway Yin Kyaw Gain does not give instructions for practice designed for the attainment of enlightenment and nirvana. The members are merely provided with the means to serve as exorcists (see also Rozenberg
2012). We could refer to these congregations as traditional esoteric congregations with an apotropaic orientation. By contrast, the *ariyā-weizzā* organization represents a modern form of Buddhism; more precisely esoteric modern Buddhism. Like the representatives of rational modern Buddhism in the insight meditation movement, the congregation consists predominantly of Buddhist lay people who have embarked on the path to enlightenment and nirvana, practice meditation, and expect immediate results (here: transmutation, supernatural powers, etc.). This is a supermundane congregation with both a soteriological and apotropaic orientation (the members can serve as exorcists).

The *ariyā-weizzā* organization was founded by a layman – a former military officer – in the late 1940s, and the members refer to him as the ‘Exalted Royal Father’ (*khamedaw-hpayā*). The founder, who was ascribed charismatic authority by his followers, was – and is still – believed to be an ‘incarnation’ of Sekyā Min, as well as a future Buddha, a dhammarāja and an accomplished esoteric master. Symbolically restoring the monarchy in accordance with the Asokan model and its two wheels of the Dhamma, the hierarchical organization of the congregation was – at least nominally – complete with minor vassal kings and other royalties, such as a chief queen and crown prince at each local centre, and it also had a small community of monks with its own hierarchy. Moreover, the members were ascribed a royal identity and understood to be part of a royal family. The congregation’s practices are part of a fully-fledged Theravāda Buddhist *bodhisattayāna*, a ‘vehicle of future buddhas’ (see Foxeus 2011). Adopting the soteriological model of the Burmese kings, the *ariyā-weizzā* organization’s self-image is one of a moral community of *bodhisattas*.

The tenets and practices of the *ariyā-weizzā* organization are claimed to represent ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ Buddhism as distinguished from traditional or inherited Buddhism. Some leaders described the latter as a rather simple

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35 I conducted fieldwork in Burma periodically from 2005 to 2008, both in Upper and Lower Burma. Due to the nature of the *ariyā-weizzā* organization, I have decided to alter its name and render my informants anonymous.

36 The founder passed away in 1999, but the members believe that rather than dying he underwent a transmutation and left for a hidden abode.

37 The kings modelled their soteriological careers on the narrative of Gotama Buddha. For more on this model for the kings, see Koenig 1990. For more on Gotama Buddha’s path to buddhahood as a model for esoteric congregations, see Foxeus 2011.

38 *ta-keh boudddha-bhāthā*.

39 *mi-you:hpala-bouddha-bhāthā*.
form of practice in terms of merit-making (giving alms-food to the monks, etc.) and the observance of some Buddhist precepts. While that represented a kind of passive form of Buddhist practice, both the esoteric congregation and the insight meditation movement, by contrast, claimed to represent more active forms of practice requiring effort, resolution, and commitment (see Houtman 1990, Foxeus 2011). The esoteric congregation’s ‘authentic’ form of Buddhism is said to be largely derived from a supernatural and likewise esoteric source of authority, viz. the accomplished esoteric master U Dhammasāri and his Golden Book. The founder claimed to have learnt about the content of this book in the hidden country of the semi-immortal accomplished esoteric masters. In contrast to pre-colonial Buddhism, but like modern Buddhism in general, the *ariyā-weizzā* organization is ‘doctrinal’, framing its tenets in *Abhidamma*-style terminology.

The *ariyā-weizzā* organization’s tenets and practices are thus characterized by a high degree of *ariya* discourse assimilation. In line with the quest for authentic Buddhism, its esoteric tenets and practices – by which both mundane and supermundane *weizzā*hood, as well as *arahan*hood and buddha- hood can be attained – are qualified as *ariyā* (*P. ariya*) ‘noble’, ‘pure’. For instance, the founder’s ‘second book’, entitled *Ariyā-weizzā Paṭipāt Dhāt-tek-sin-kyan* (1997), ‘The Development of Dhāt and the Practice of Noble Esoteric Knowledge’, underscores doctrines such as the four noble truths, the eightfold path, the noble path of the four noble ones, the wrong notion of personality belief (*P. sakkāya-diṭṭhi*), and so forth. Moreover, the members must vow to observe the rather austere ‘noble discipline’ (*P. ariya-sikkhā*), an essential element of which is the vow to seek to fulfill perfections (*P. pāramī*) to attain final release from the rounds of rebirth in one of five modalities of enlightenment. The emphasis on moral discipline is in accord with several

40 This form of Buddhism is what has been referred to as traditional mainstream Buddhism above.

41 U Dhammasāri is regarded as a monk. Hence, like the modern lineage of insight meditation monks (see Houtman 1990), monastic authority is emphasized in esoteric Buddhism as well. In general, many founders of esoteric congregations are said to have been monks, or the esoteric knowledge disseminated in esoteric congregations is claimed to be derived from monks (see Tosa 2006).

42 A variety of supernatural powers can also be acquired by means of these practices (see Foxeus 2011).

43 At the initiation rituals, every member must make a vow to observe the noble discipline for the rest of their lives as follows: 1) to observe the five Buddhist precepts (*P. sīla*), 2) to take refuge in the Three Jewels, 3) to pay respect to the Five Eternities (Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha, teachers, and parents), 4) to support and defend the
new Buddhist movements in Southeast Asia (see Schober 1995), including fundamentalist ones (see Swearer 1991). Moreover, the congregation’s most important practices are its own meditation techniques, the generic name of which is ariyā-weiżzā-paṭipāt, the ‘noble esoteric practices.’ These consist of five main meditation practices and three auxiliary ones, most of which are peculiar ‘tantric’ visualization techniques classified as concentration meditation.44 Such visualizations include the practitioner temporarily transforming into the Buddha, a cosmic Buddha influencing the whole world, or into a mighty world emperor combating the anti-Buddhist forces (see Foxeus, forthcoming).45

The ariya discourse represents a purist orientation, aiming to criticize or eliminate what are perceived as non-Buddhist elements, such as the Gandhāra practices. For the ariyā-weiżzā organization, qualifying its tenets and practices as ariya thus serves as a discursive strategy to present itself as a supermundane congregation. This discourse therefore posits the congregation as being superior to the majority of the other esoteric congregations, which are typically concerned with mundane Gandhāra lore.46

**Conclusion**

Since the the colonial period in Burma, the supermundane ariya discourse spread and became increasingly relevant for the Buddhist lay people, especially through the effort of the famous monk Ledi Hsayādaw. His dissemination of a simplified version of the abstract and scholastic form of Buddhism which had previously been reserved for an elite in the monastic community was to

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44 All but two of these altogether eight practices are visualization techniques. According to the congregation, to attain saṁhhood and buddhahood it is also necessary to practice insight meditation, at least in the final stages.

45 Moreover, like other supermundane congregations, the ariyā-weiżzā organization excludes the lower nats but includes the Buddhist gods (P. deva, brahmā) in its rituals.

46 For other supermundane esoteric congregations employing this strategy, see Tosa 1996: 242. In its more or less explicit criticism of the Gandhāra lore, the ariyā-weiżzā organization sides with many practitioners of insight meditation, who disparage these practices as being non-Buddhist (see Houtman 1990: 186; Patton 2012).
a large extent motivated by an urge to defend Buddhism against criticism from Christian missionaries. In the postcolonial period, the *ariya* discourse – this simplified, doctrinal textbook Buddhism – was disseminated by the insight meditation movement, etc.; it represented a rational form of modern Buddhism and became an influential force in the religious field. In the colonial era and the early post-independence period, the *ariya* discourse seems mainly to have been popular among the Burmese middle-classes, but today has spread to people across all the social strata. The notion of the Liberation Era – specified as the Era of Insight Meditation – served as a conceptual framework to make sense of the Buddhist resurgence in the early postcolonial period, and as a rationale for the relevance of the *ariya* discourse among the Buddhist lay people. Moreover, it provided legitimacy for the concomitant view that anybody could make soteriological progress. Throughout the post-independence period in Burma, we can thus see an increasing trend toward emphasizing the supramundane *ariya* dimension of Buddhism, and a corresponding criticism of the ‘Others’ of this discourse, such as the Gandhāra congregations, the nat cults, foreign elements, etc.

For the congregations representing esoteric modern Buddhism that view themselves as supramundane with a soteriological orientation, the *ariya* discourse has served as a discursive strategy to acquire legitimacy, authority, and status. That is, it has served as an idiom by which congregations can claim high status for themselves while criticizing others. As a case in point, the *ariyā-weizzā* organization, characterized by fundamentalist features, sought to revive a simplified form of what was perceived as the authentic aristocratic, pre-colonial form of Buddhism, untainted by foreign ideologies, and it assimilated the *ariya* discourse to a very large degree. At the same time, the congregation’s eclectic form of Buddhism served as a Buddhist bulwark in the congregation’s cosmic ‘battle’ by ritual means against what it feared to be anti-Buddhist forces (Western ideologies, errant religions, technology, etc.) endangering the existence of Buddhism in the world. However, this contest should largely be understood as a way of dealing with (Western) modernity and the corrosive force it was feared to be exerting on the indigenous traditions, culture, and religion. In general, the *ariya* discourse could be said to represent a purist trend in a quest for an authentic Buddhism, one that has had an immense influence on the field of religion in postcolonial Burma.
NIKLAS FOXEUS

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Turner, Alicia

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An instance of secularization?
The Finnish online discussion of the issue of same-sex marriages

Introduction

In October 2010 one of Finland’s four national TV channels aired a panel discussion dealing with gay and lesbian rights in society. Among the debaters were members of parliament from various parties, well-known actors and other public figures, as well as a priest, a bishop and other religious spokespeople. Although the conversation initially was about gay and lesbian rights in Finnish society overall, the conversation both in the TV studio, and especially in the public debate afterwards concentrated quite heavily on the Evangelical Lutheran Church and its attitude to homosexual people. The most debated topic became whether the Lutheran Church should and could grant same-sex couples the right to have a Christian wedding ceremony.

A great number of people publicly expressed their views on same-sex marriages. Further, the ways the Lutheran Church treated the same-sex couples, as well as the reasons and outcomes of a vast number of resignations from the Church were discussed, particularly in the online discussion forums, but also in newspaper articles and in letters to the editor. The public discussion spread rapidly, especially through the social media, whereas newspapers covered the issue after a slight delay.

People had already started to resign from the Church during the television broadcast and did so via a website provided by the Vakaumusten tasa-arvo (the Equality of Convictions Organisation). Despite the fact that the most prominent opponents of same-sex marriages on the TV panel were two MPs – including the chairperson of the Christian Democrats and a member of The Finns, a populist right-wing party – numerous people announced publicly that they had resigned as a protest against the intolerant views of the Church. During the weeks that followed a record number of people were to resign.¹

¹ In less than a week following the TV panel, 24,000 people resigned, whereas in the whole previous year there had been 43,650 resignations. In 2010 altogether 83,097 people resigned (sakasti.evl.fi 2011).
Resignations from the Church are often perceived as a clear sign of the decline of religious beliefs and practices, which is an integral aspect of the secularization process. But lately the whole notion of a secularization of society has been questioned. Many sociologists have begun to doubt that a decline of religious beliefs and practices exists. José Casanova has proposed that we should rather talk about a de-privatization of religion rather than a marginalization of religion into the private sphere (Casanova 1994: 211–14; Casanova 2011: 60). A growing number of researchers have stated that the concepts of resacralization, desecularization, or a resurgence of religion would actually better describe the current situation than the theory of secularization (see Köhrsen 2012, Moberg et al. 2012). Yet the Nordic countries have often been taken up as examples of countries where the secularization theory still works (see Sidenvall 2010). The aim of this article is to examine whether the concept of secularization still has some explanatory power – if revised as Marcus Moberg and others (2012) propose – at least in the Nordic countries. Another aim is to contemplate what kind of knowledge has this special case – namely that of the same-sex marriage debate – to offer when thinking again about secularization?

According to José Casanova the theory of secularization entails three related but distinct processes: 1) the differentiation of secular spheres from religious institutions and norms, 2) the decline of religious beliefs and practices, and 3) the marginalization of religion into the private sphere (Casanova 1994: 211; Casanova 2011: 60). The online public discussion around same-sex marriage provides an interesting case when considering secularization in the Nordic countries, since here the diverse processes of secularization have become strongly intertwined. Furthermore, the online users themselves express their views on the above-mentioned issues. Firstly, the issue of a differentiation of society was tackled by the online users as they argued over the separation of church and state. Secondly, the participants conveyed what they believed in and what not, and furthermore, also assessed other people’s beliefs. Thirdly, the discussion on religion was not marginalized but took place in a public arena. In addition, the participants debated on the public prominence of the Lutheran Church in Finnish society.

The studies of religion and religiousness have mostly depended on surveys and they have, no doubt, a great deal of useful information still to offer. However, one should pay attention to the fact that Europeans tend to understate their religiosity when asked about it (Casanova 2011: 67–8). As Grace Davie (2007: 27–30) has indicated, new kinds of methods are also needed in order to grasp the complex relations that people have towards religion(s)
and religiousness: not everything can be reckoned in numbers. This study approaches secularization from the perspective of online users and the discourses that they use when talking about religion, Christianity and the Lutheran Church. In my analysis I ask the following questions: How did the participants express their relationship to the Church and/or to religion? How was the place and role of the Lutheran Church in Finnish society seen in this debate?

The online discussions as research material

The research material collected for this study comes from two online discussion forums. Both are linked to an online version of a Finnish newspaper. The first one, *Helsingin Sanomat*, is a nationwide, capital-based newspaper that reaches around 1 million of the 5 million Finnish population. Roughly 50 per cent of these are located in the Helsinki metropolitan area. It is often considered as being liberal in its social values, but has also been seen to have a troubled relationship with the Lutheran Church (see Teräsvirta 2002). The second newspaper, *Kaleva*, is a provincial newspaper that reaches approximately 190,000 people, mainly in the north western part of Finland. In this area Laestadianism, a conservative Lutheran revival movement, has a strong impact, but the relationship between *Kaleva* and the Laestadians has also been tempestuous.

The online discussion boards have a reputation for being places for hostile verbal attacks and irrational, hastily written posts, and in many cases this is true. However, this is not the whole picture. Though the online discussions have not fulfilled the dream of a deliberative public sphere, there are still many reasons to look at them more closely. The basic characters of online conversation – interactivity and dialogue between the users, the opportunity to bridge physical distances between people, the potential for anonymity and the reduced feelings of social presence make the online discussions an interesting source of research material when analyzing ideological and political conversations (Stromer-Galley and Wichowsky 2011: 168–70).

In studying the discourses on religion the above-mentioned characteristics of the social media are also essential. This is especially the case in Finland as it can be argued that making public one’s reflections on one’s relation to religion is in some sense a taboo subject (for a slightly similar situation in Denmark and Sweden, see Zuckerman 2008: 12–14). Also those people who wish not to be taken as religious publicly are able to take part in an anony-
mous online discussion on religion. Further, the capacity of online discussions to connect people with different backgrounds and attitudes is clearly visible in the threads that I am analyzing. Among the participants there were people who stated that; 1) they had resigned from the Church, or 2) had considered resigning, or 3) wanted to maintain Church membership; and there were even those who stated 4) that they had considered rejoining the Church. Thus, the online discussions analyzed here are not merely ‘religion online’ (Helland 2000 in Campbell 2011: 234) or ‘religion in cyberspace’ (Karaflogka 2007: 14–15), but a combination of religious, non-religious and undecided views on the Church, on Christianity and on religion in general.

I concentrate on analyzing altogether five discussion threads: three threads from Kaleva and two from Helsingin Sanomat. The entire material consists of 1,141 individual messages. All the threads were launched within a few days of the TV panel discussion, which was aired on the 12th of October 2010. The time span of the threads varies, but all the messages were sent between the 13th and 23rd of October. There are more messages from Kaleva (748 in total) than from Helsingin Sanomat (393 in total) but the messages on Kaleva's discussion forum tend to be distinctly shorter than those on Helsingin Sanomat's board.

The two online forums are a bit different from each other. On Kaleva's discussion forum you are able freely to start a discussion on your chosen topic. On the Helsingin Sanomat site the discussion forum is connected to a specific article. So in principle, people are expected to comment on the article and/or its topic. The tone of the discussion on these two forums is also slightly different, as the Kaleva's discussion contains more poorly argued posts and some provocative messages. However, on both forums the majority of the messages involved quite serious and thoroughly validated reflections on same-sex marriages, on the Lutheran Church as well as on the teachings of the Bible.

On online forums there are often a few very eager participants who write to the board very frequently (see e.g. Mäntymäki 2006: 121–5). This applies also to my research material. Yet, these few active writers do not control the conversation; there is plenty of room for other participants' views too. Furthermore, as I am interested in the discourses relating to religion and the Lutheran Church, the amounts of messages of some writers are not so relevant to my analysis. When I use the term discourse I mean, following Michel Foucault, practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak, and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention (Foucault 1989: 49). Thus, when repeated discourses construct the way people see Christianity and the Lutheran Church, as well as its priests and membership. Furthermore,
discourses are essential to the formation of identities and shape the ways in which people see each other.

On the discussion board, the same writers often reiterate certain discourses again and again. On the other hand, some writers depend on more than one discourse in a single message – even contradictory ones. Especially when explaining the resignations of other people the users may also repeat other discourses relating to the Church and religion than which they publicly and knowingly adhere to. Hence, my interest lies not in the motifs or ideologies of individual writers, nor in the exact number of different kinds of messages, but in the various ways in which the Lutheran Church and its activities are currently understood and interpreted. My aim is to scrutinize the multiple ways in which people themselves explain their relationship to the Church, to its membership and to resignation in the context of the same-sex marriages debate.

In my analysis I have outlined five discourses which entail divergent, though closely intertwined, understandings and ways of speaking about the Lutheran Church. Each of them embodies a similar way of understanding the role of the Church, even though they may contain contradictory views and interpretations of the Bible, of same-sex marriages, or of the current situation of the Lutheran Church. The discourses are; 1) the Church as a promulgator, 2) the Church as a community, 3) the Church as a state institution, 4) the Church as a service provider; and 5) the Church as a meaningless institution.

Even though the two discussion boards have some differences in their structure and tone, all five discourses are clearly evident on both boards.

The Church as a promulgator

Within a discourse of the Church as a promulgator the stand the Church takes in the same-sex marriage issue is very meaningful in people's lives. Here the main role of the Church is understood as offering people guidance, teaching what the Bible says and saying what is right and wrong. Thus, the writings dependent on this discourse share this perception of the Church as an important moral instructor. In several messages the writer declares that he/she will decide on the basis of the stance of the Church whether to continue membership or to resign.

This discourse includes plenty of debates on what the Bible says (or does not say) about homosexuality. The argument on the teachings of the Bible follows a repeating pattern. While others hold out for the claim that according to
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certain scriptures in the Bible homosexuality is a sin, some question the logic of such literalistic interpretations and question why only these commandments are taken as coercive while others are not (see similarities in Swedish youngsters’ discussions in Lövheim 2007: 88–90).

Consequently, this discourse entails antithetical views on same-sex marriage, as the writers’ interpretations of the scriptures of the Bible, as well as its role in the Lutheran Church differ from each other. The arguments based on literalistic interpretations state that the Church should stick to the teachings of the Bible. It is quite often stated that the Church ceases to be a church if it does not adhere to the teachings of the Bible. In these messages the problem of the Lutheran Church is not the same-sex marriage issue, but the reluctance of the Church to state publicly that homosexuality is a sin. This interpretation often entails a perception that the Lutheran Church is renouncing the true teachings of the Bible and, furthermore, is doing this in order to the hold on to as many members as possible:

The Lutheran Church dares not to make its stand clear, for it wants to fawn on all the people. That is not morally right. The church should call sin a sin, even if someone gets hurt and resigns. This kow-towing in every direction irritates people more than proclaiming the truth. This is something that the church will find more clearly in the near future. The church has not learnt its own mission, which is the teaching by the Bible. The teachings are taken from the world though everything should be asked from God. The Church does not understand that when you bow in one direction you moon to the other. This does not work anymore, unfortunately. The church must not make fool of a man.²

The Finnish Lutheran Church has lately embraced the idea of the multi-voiced church which has its basis in the Lutheran doctrine of the general priesthood.³ But this idea seems to be confusing to many writers:

The reason for resignations is the spiritual emptiness of the church. They say themselves that its walls are wide and the roof is high. It does not make clear to a common man what the message of the church is. The

² All the quotations are taken from the discussion boards of Helsingin Sanomat and Kaleva.

³ E.g. the opening speech by the Archbishop Kari Mäkinen in the General Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland in 2.5.2011 was entitled ‘A multi-voiced Church necessitates adulthood, humility and braveness’ (Mäkinen 2011).
thing you can notice is that they can't discuss with each other very deeply. One thinks one thing and someone else another. Then they sulk and scold each other in the papers. Disagreement is the thing that comes to your mind when you think about the folk church. What I am sure of is that disagreement has nothing to do with God's will. Why should one seek for guidance from such shepherds?

According to views of this kind the Church has failed in its role as a promulgator, either because its message is unclear (it is hard to know what the Lutheran Church says on this matter and who has the authority to represent the Church); or the idea of the multi-voiced Church is understood as disintegration, as in the previous example.

It is often claimed that modernity pressures religions into forms of pluralism, in the process relativizing their messages. Religions are seen to take on worldly commitments at the expense of 'the pure'. This pluralizing process is seen to be speeded up by an increasing personal autonomy in faith practice which encourages religions to further relativize their message in order to compete in a secular-media-defined marketplace of ideas (Hoover and Kaneva 2009: 9). Yet it is important to highlight the intricate nature of this process. The messages entail an expectation of the Church as the supreme authority which pronounces unto all the people what is a sin. But, after the Church ceases to be the kind of authority that these writers expect they may take their faith and religious practices into their own hands. Thus, the growing lack of religious institutions to control the beliefs and religious practices that secularization theory – and the mediatization theory presupposes (see Lövheim 2011) – seems to suit this case in the sense that the Church is really losing its authority. However, in the messages under analysis here the diminished control is preceded by feelings of having been betrayed by the Church in its inability to use its legitimate right and power to control its members and society overall.

In the writings that take a positive stand towards same-sex marriage the position of the Church is seen as hypocritical and not in line with the message of Christianity. Hence, these writers refer more to the main principles of Christianity – as they see it – than to certain scriptures.

Fortunately there is an option that you can resign from the church, for you can't resign from your sexual orientation. That is a thing that God has created. Why does the Church allow murderers to marry but not decent citizens? I don't understand this, for doesn't it say in the Decalogue that Thou shalt not kill, so that those kinds of people are against God's rules.
The position of the Church on the issue of same-sex marriage is important to these writers, and they hope for approval from the Church towards the same-sex couples:

From the agenda of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland you can find guidelines for the blessing of the home, the sowing of the crops, the harvest, the school, the industrial plant, the office or some other working place. I know that a motorway has been blessed, as well as the newest building of Parliament. One parish of Helsinki has arranged blessings for pets on the Senate Square. How hard it is to bless two loving people?

In these kinds of writings the practices of the Church are understood as being an integral part of its moral instruction. The conferring of a blessing on something or someone is mostly seen as approval of their existence by the Church – not as the presence of God in their lives and actions. In relation to the concept of secularization the outcome of the analysis is, again, complex. The messages encompass a perception of the Church as something meaningful – and as an authority, too. At the same time, within this discourse as a whole, the understanding of the teachings of the Church may be tentative. But the idea that this is something that has changed during the process of modernization, as the theory of secularization presupposes, is debatable. Several researchers have pointed out that it is a mistake to presume that people in Nordic countries had internalized the teachings of the Christian Church in pre-modern times, or even in the last few hundreds of years (see Markkola 2003: 56–9; Sidenvall 2010). What can be said is that in this discourse neither Church nor its norms are separated from the secular spheres. Further, the Church and religion are not marginalized into the private sphere, but seem to be important elements in the writers’ lives.

**The Church as a community**

In the discourse of the Church as a community the Church is primarily seen as a union of its members; as a congregation. The idea of the community is understood in two different ways. Some emphasize the duties of the members to follow the rules of the community. In messages written from that perspective, the writers are usually against same-sex marriages and stress the obligation of the commandments of the Bible to the Church members. As in the following example, many also claim that the Church has obligations towards its
‘old’ members whereas the proponents of the same-sex marriage and/or gays and lesbians are presumed to be people who either have not been members at all or are not, at any rate, devoted members of the Church:

The church should respect its old membership and not run after the few per cent of new members. Some free religious groups have acted in a more fair way, as in them a preacher who has disagreed with others has founded his own congregation and the members have been able to choose freely to which shepherd they have wanted to listen. I am myself a member of the Orthodox Church. If I wanted to act for the clerical rights of sexual minorities, I would switch to the Lutheran Church and would not make a racket in my present church. Everyone should seek an appropriate church or other religious community for themselves and stop trashing their present church if they disagree with its teachings.

Others accentuate the possibility of members to make an impact inside the community, including the teachings and religious practices of the Church. According to this way of thinking the idea of the multi-voiced Church is highlighted and appreciated:

I belong to a church where the most important thing is neither homosexuality nor its demur, but whole different things. I belong to a church where people disagree on many things but where things are discussed and, people are trying to build something good and right together. These kinds of things are discussed energetically now on Facebook. Luckily Päivi Räsänen,4 or other persons who expressed their views on the TV panel are not the whole church. There are many of us on the other side, too.

As in the messages which express the view that the Church should respect those of its members who are devoted to the teaching of the sinfulness of homosexuality, so also the writers that advocate same-sex marriage postulate that the Church should listen to its members when making decisions on the issue. Especially in the context of the forthcoming parish elections which were scheduled for the following November (2010), many writers urge others on to vote and in that way make an impact in the Church:

4 Päivi Räsänen is the chairperson of the Christian Democrats Party.
The parish elections are on their way. Now parishioners have a great opportunity to bring out their views on which kind of church they want to belong to. I hope this discussion will make people vote and vote for candidates that believe in an equal, tolerant, forgiving, merciful church which also approves gay people. I am amazed how some of the ancient writings are still interpreted literally and some as depictions and embodiments of their time which cannot be applied to the present.

The discourse on the Church as a community is especially interesting in relation to the theory of secularization. Secularization theory embodies a presumption that modern values lead to the decline of religious beliefs and practices (see Casanova 2011: 60). However, in these messages people take such modern values as equality and tolerance for granted but also imply that they are devoted to the Church as a community. Therefore, they neither insist on a separation of the Church and state nor consider resigning from it but want to influence the Church to be modern and tolerant. As Hoover and Kaneva have stated, modernity does not inevitably lead to a decline in religion; modernity might rather be said to co-evolve with religion (Hoover and Kaneva 2009: 8). Thus, modernization may lead to the rise of new forms of religion rather than to secularization.

The Church as a state institution

The discourse of the Church as a state institution5 – or as almost a state institution – includes most atheistic views. In these kinds of messages the right of the Lutheran Church to collect taxes from its members and especially from enterprises is seen as unjustified. Many writers demand the separation of the Church and state. Mostly these statements include a stated position of the writer as a nonbeliever who is irritated by the fact that the Lutheran Church

5 The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland is not a state church in the precise meaning of the concept. The Church has autonomy in its internal affairs. However, on the basis of its public rights in state legislation, the Church is entitled to collect taxes. In addition to Church members, societies and corporations are also required to pay church taxes, with the exception of registered religious organizations and free-thinker societies. Parishes continue to take responsibility for maintaining census registration data concerning their members, and for their funeral services. With rare exceptions, parish cemeteries are to remain the usual burial place even for non-members of the Lutheran Church. See the website of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland.
still has so strong an influence – as they see it – on Finnish legislation, on the Finnish primary and secondary school system and on other state-related institutions and practices. In the same-sex marriage issue the Church is required to act according to the civil laws as long as – in practice – it still has a position as a state church:

This is very hard to accept as long as we have two churches in a special position, supported by the state, which means that they are public corporations. If they each were funded only by their members they could do as they like. But as long as every Finn takes part in funding these institutions, everyone also has a right to criticize their actions.

The church is the real fare-dodger. The right to carry taxes implies that fairy tale club in question would somehow be connected to the state and to legal society but this fairy tale club regularly closes its eyes to the offences of the constitution and the Equality Act.

There are also some messages where writers who declare their commitment to Christianity also propose the separation of Church and state, or at least a loosening up of the relationship. In these writings the separation is seen as a way to maintain the autonomy of the Church, especially in terms of doctrinal issues, such as same-sex marriages:

Church and state should be separated quickly. The separation would purify them both.

If the Evangelical Lutheran Church decides to start marrying gay couples then I will resign from the Church, too, and I think that so will many others. The right of the Evangelical Lutheran Church to tax should probably be narrowed down – maybe these bristling demands for tolerance would in that case diminish.

Thus, both sides see the separation or the distancing of the state and Church from each other as a solution to the same-sex marriage problem: as a free religious community the Lutheran Church could apply its own rules despite of the possible changes in the civilian law. The differentiation of secular spheres from religious institutions and norms is something that within this discourse both declared believers and non-believers demand. It can be claimed that the differentiation of secular and religious spheres is, in a way, a secular resolution as such, but the motives behind this conclusion may also be religious.
An instance of secularization?

The Church as a service provider

In the discourse of the Church as a service provider writers discuss primarily how it functions as a provider for various kinds of services, usually rather practical ones, such as children’s clubs or aid for poor people. In few cases the spiritual services are also mentioned, but this is rare. Within this discourse marriage is a service you are entitled to, regardless of your sexual orientation, since you have paid for membership:

The rainbow folk belonging to the Church finance the people’s church as much as other citizens, in the same way that we all finance this common society. Since anyone’s tax money serves for church it is then rather strange that at the same price someone gets a different standard of service.

Within the discourse of the Church as a service provider the church tax is understood as a payment for the Church’s services. In most of these messages the writer declares that he/she has recently concluded that the Church is a lousy service provider when it comes to his/her needs. This kind of discourse is also strongly opposed in many messages, for example, those emphasizing that the Church is not an enterprise. Further, these kinds of claims are seen as unjustified attempts to ‘falsify’ religion. However, the opposing stands are not as widespread in the discussion as are messages posted in a vein similar to the quoted example.

In addition, many suspect that other people still belong to the Church only because of the services, such as Christian wedding ceremony, that it provides. One message entails a vision of a discount membership of the Church:

It would be interesting to see how many would take up a discount membership of the church in which you would only be entitled to those church weddings, e.g. 10 per cent discount of the full membership. How many of the present members would change to cheaper option and how many of those who resigned would rejoin?

Instead of that of a believer the messages embrace the perspective of a consumer. David Lyon has claimed that the individualistic approach to religion may be associated with consumerist attitudes and lifestyles in which choice is the supreme value. Consumerism is a challenge to religious institutions: in economic terms, the cultural and religious monopolies are being dismantled, and a deregulated cultural marketplace is emerging. Old religious institutions
are not able to compete in this situation. People are still believing and seeking, but they do it in ways that sideline the old institutions. Furthermore, the religious institutions have also started to talk about the promotion, marketing and delivery of their services (Lyon 2000: 32, 74–80).

It can be claimed that in Finland the Lutheran Church has itself engaged in the consumerist way of thinking to some extent. The Church has carried out an inspection of its services, analyzing their customer orientation (see Vuokko 1996) and on a four yearly basis has asked of the parishioners what kind of image, for example, the Church has in their opinion and what kind of expectations they have for Church (see e.g. Gallup Ecclesiastica 2007). But the above-described discourse is different from what Lyon terms as a consumer’s selection of beliefs. In the discourse of the Church as a service provider which is found on the net, belief is a secondary, or even irrelevant, thing. Instead, the Church is approached in the same way as any other service provider who just happens to offer activities for children or Christmas carol sing-songs, while its religious or spiritual mission seems to be rather insignificant. This applies both to people who seem to believe in God and to those who do not. In many cases, the writers’ relationship to religion is not mentioned at all:

It is a shame that the appearance and the views of some people cause resignations from the church. The Church does a lot of good work that is not done by municipalities or the state, or completes it. For example, the activities for children and the young people, and for the old people. In addition to this, the church is a significant actor on the music front.

Oh no, hundreds of people resigned from the church. What’s the fuss, people resign every day, because the church does not provide anything. You have to pay for everything, even the church tax, and what do you get: nothing. Even the Christmas carol events are subject to a charge nowadays.

Several writers state that they are still members of the Church because of the services it gives to people with limited resources. During the recession in the 1990s the social work of the Church gained much positive media publicity (Yeung 2003: 204), and earlier studies show that Finns have previously considered the social work of the Lutheran Church as one of its most important areas of work (Veikkola 1990: 494). Anna Birgitta Yeung has claimed that this heightened public role of the Church can be understood as a sign of deprivatization, and as a result of this thinking, she brings up a question of the
possible resacralization of Finnish society (Yeung 2003: 206–7). Yet the web forum messages analyzed here suggest that using the services of the Church have no relation to the commitment of the religious teachings of the Church. Thus, the marginalization of religion into the private sphere – which is one aspect of the José Casanova’s conceptualization of the secularization – is clearly not happening – which the whole public discussion on the same-sex marriage in the Lutheran Church demonstrates (see also Moberg and Sjö 2011). Despite this fact, the significant public role of the Church does not seem to have a clear relationship to the other aspect of secularization – the decline of religious beliefs and practices. What seems to be more accurate in this case is that the individualistic discourse related to neoliberalism is also applied to religion and the Church. Whereas in previous studies this individualism and neoliberalism has been linked more strongly to ‘popular religion’ (see Frisk and Nynäs 2012: 50–1) in this case an individualistic approach is also used in the context of ‘organized’ religion. In the Finnish (and possibly in the Nordic) context the critical discourse related to the welfare state seems to also include the Lutheran Church, as it is understood to be a public resource.

The Church as a meaningless institution

This discourse has the most variety of views on the Church, and especially on the Christian religion. What unites the contributions is an understanding of the Church as something which is irrelevant. In many messages it is stated that the writer believes in God but does not need the Church to believe. Others have a somewhat hazy relation to religion, or they have renounced their faith – at least their faith in the teachings of the Lutheran Church. But regardless of their beliefs, in this discourse the Church is seen as a remote institution that has nothing to do with their personal beliefs or morals:

I resigned from the church years ago, and I really don’t need a priest to stand by grave. I have agreed with my children that I will be cremated and there will be no party. They do what they want with the ashes. The Lutheran Church is only 2 per cent of all the Christians, how could only it be right?

The above statement could also be used as an example of the relativization of religion. This entails that individuals form their religious identities in the knowledge that their religion is only one of several possibilities (see Frisk and
This may lead to a non-religious worldview, as in the previous example. Or it may lead to religious eclecticism, as Liselotte Frisk and Peter Nynäs bring up, and as the following quote exemplifies:

I don’t want a church blessing for my marriage because it would mean that their views would interest me, or that I would let them affect on my decisions. It is quite reasonable to believe in God or spiritualities, for we can’t know the truth of the creation of the world and so on. But the bible is written by man and it can’t be accepted as a ‘god’s’ word, and to discriminate with a hand on it.6

Yet, the separation of Church and belief within the Nordic countries has been remarked upon before. As Birger Nygaard has shown in his study about ‘ordinary’ Danes, people seem to have clear distinctions between the two parts: belief is in one category while the institution of religion and religious practices are in another category, and these two categories are separated from each other (Nygaard 2010). The following quote illustrates well this kind of attitude:

I did not resign from God or the angels, but from the church, which I do not want to respect as an institution. My God and angels can be found in nature and my own innermost being. I will give my money to people that I know and I can trust that they will take it to help there where there is poverty and misery.

When contemplating this discourse in the context of secularization it is once again important to notice the complexity of the current situation. Within this discourse many messages point to a (fairly) secular worldview. Further, if a writer professes some kind of belief it is then considered as private matter, grounded in individual choice. But this privacy of religion is only in relation to the Church as a religious institution. In relation to the media, the writers discuss their beliefs at least in the semi-public environment of the web discussion forum.

The messages within this discourse may indicate that another kind of religious change is happening than what the ‘old’ secularization theory forecast. According to Frisk and Nynäs this process is now accelerating because of globalization which is resulting in a religious change characterized by

6 God and Bible are written with a small first capital in the original online message.
An instance of secularization?

celecticism, an emphasis on personal experience, non-institutionalism or religiosity in the private mode, radical egalitarianism, self-spirituality and emphasis on this-worldliness (Frisk and Nynäs 2012). These tendencies are all seen in the messages within this discourse. On the other hand, the emphasis on personalized belief has a long history in Europe which can be traced from the Reformation (Taylor 2011: 214–28) to the new-age-influenced spirituality that emerged on a larger scale in the 1960s (see Martin 2010: 65). In the end, what these messages have in common is the lack of belief in dogma or to the authority of religious institutions.

Conclusion: partly secular but not secularized?

The online discussion on the same-sex marriage issue encompasses a contradictory range of material when thinking again the concept of secularization. On the basis of this particular discussion it seems that at present, there are simultaneously a variety of processes going on that have a very different social and cultural history and a varying time span. Furthermore, if religiousness is changing, this change is linked with ideological changes in other sectors of Finnish society.

As to the issue of religious belief and practices, the material analyzed gives an insight into the great diversity of Finnish society which has often been understood as very homogeneous in its religious view of life. The messages include a lot of secular views – but on the other hand, also plenty of confessions of belief, and the discussion shows the great variation in the people’s relationships to the Church. What becomes clear is that the number of church membership resignations is not something that one could use to draw conclusions about secularization. However, neither is the percentage of membership something that you can take as a sign of devotion to the Church or its teachings.

The Lutheran Church and therefore Christianity as a religion has not been marginalized out of the Finnish public sphere, nor has it been totally separated from the secular institutions. In the Finnish context, the Church still bears the profile of a significant public actor – in both negative and positive ways. This obviously has to do with its particular position as a folk church. However, it is possible that the Church’s history as a folk church has recently led to another kind of tendency in thinking. When the earlier tradition of the folk church combined with a welfare state ideology is then mixed in with the new kind
of neoliberalist and individualist thinking, the outcome is a perception of the Church as a service provider among other institutions and enterprises.

The claimed new trends of eclecticism, with an emphasis on personal experience, non-institutionalism or religiosity in the private mode, radical egalitarianism and self-spirituality are present in the discussion. At the same time, it seems that these kinds of trends are being mixed with earlier influences of Lutheranism, such as an emphasis on personalized beliefs. These ideological tendencies also seem to have their impact on the established relationships between the Lutheran Church and its parishioners. However, it is important not to exaggerate the recent changes, especially in the Nordic context, for it is not clear that the orthodox ways of belief ever prevailed in the decades before the age of ‘secularization’.

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**Sidenvall, Erik**

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**Taylor, Charles**

**Teräsvirta, Laura**

**Veikkola, Juhani**

**Vuokko, Pirjo**

**Yeung, Anne Birgitta**

**Zuckerman, Philip**
Although Catholic monasteries are theoretically out of the world, monks and nuns more and more use the internet, both for religious and non-religious reasons. While society at large often takes it for granted that monks are out of modernity, monastic communities have been adopted this media from relatively early on, and we cannot say that they have come late to its use. The internet can offer monasteries a lot of advantages because it allows monks to be in the world without going out of the cloister. Nevertheless, the introduction of this new media in monasteries also raises a lot of questions about the potential contradictions it poses with other aspects of monastic life.

This paper does not deal with online religious practices, but seeks to research the use of the medium by monks and nuns even in their daily lives, and attempts especially to investigate the potential changes it brings to monastic life.

Having explained how monks and nuns use the internet in their daily lives, I will endeavour to explore how it can also endanger some dimensions of monastic life, as well as how monks respond to this potential threat. As a particularly striking example – because it reopens a lot of questions also asked about the internet in general – I have chosen to explore the use of the social network Facebook by monks. This article is based on field inquiries made in French and Austrian monasteries between 2009 and the present, including interviews conducted with monks and nuns, as well as a study of the monastic websites and Facebook pages, in particular 50 profiles of Austrian nuns and monks.

I am speaking specifically here about nuns and monks, so about religious people living in a contemplative monastery, not about apostolic orders which are already in the world even if the distinction is not always so clear.
ISABELLE JONVEAUX

Monks on the web: a religious use?

Rapid adoption but permanent differences

Although society often assumes a negative relationship between monasticism and modernity, monks have adopted modern technologies quite quickly, as is precedent, historically, by their use of the printing press or the telephone (Jonveaux 2009). It is almost taken for granted today that monastic communities have access to the internet. When we ask the question if they have such access, some monks reply that it goes without saying; otherwise, as an Austrian Cistercian monk says, ‘we could not use the car to go to Vienna, either, but would have to use horses instead’. Monks want to emphasise they are not outside modernity and they strive to combat the romantic and medieval image of monasticism in society, as it is conveyed in the film The Name of the Rose (1986), for instance. Nevertheless, not all communities use the internet in the same way and we can point out some differences according to some variables.

The first of these is gender. Although 93.8 per cent of the male Benedictine communities in Austria have a homepage, only 61 per cent of the female Benedictine communities do. This difference between male and female can also be observed in society in general, although it is always less pronounced. One explanation for this is that the women in religious communities are often older than their male counterparts and are for this reason less interested in new technologies. But nuns are also more out of the world than monks because of stricter rules of seclusion and they have, as a consequence, fewer contacts with people or activities outside the monasteries. Seclusion and relationship to the outside world can also explain differences between the monasteries of different European countries. As we can see in Table 1, Austrian, German or Belgian Benedictine monasteries are more likely to have a homepage than Italian or French monasteries. Yet monks of the first group are, as a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Website Male communities</th>
<th>Website Female communities</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
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<td>50.0 %</td>
<td>81.8 %</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
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<td>11.8 %</td>
<td>39.3 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>48.5 %</td>
<td>53.2 %</td>
<td>51.2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>94.3 %</td>
<td>58.5 %</td>
<td>51.2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>51.6 %</td>
<td>18.5 %</td>
<td>28.4 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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result of their history, more invested in worldly activities. Austrian monks for instance have been active in schools or parishes since the reforms passed by Joseph II between 1780 and 1788 which meant that they could be suppressed if they did not have a 'utilitarian' activity in society (Schmitz 1942). By contrast, French monasteries have been developed after the Revolution – when they lost their lands – and the new religious foundations of the nineteenth century were based on a romantic ideal of medieval monasticism, with an internal economy of production. The use of the internet is also connected to deeper dimensions of the monastic identity and the local history of each country. We can naturally imagine that this gap will be reduced in time as with this one between men and women in society for their use of new technologies.¹ But differences related to the nature of the relationships between the world and the monasteries are particularly visible.

Being in the world from the cloister: new opportunities for modern monasteries
Monasteries are theoretically out of the world and their distance from it is expressed in their rules of seclusion. Even when they perform social activities in society, they are always symbolically out of the world. As Max Weber explains:

Concentration upon the actual pursuit of salvation may entail a formal withdrawal from the ‘world’: from social and psychological ties with the family, from the possession of worldly goods, and from political, economic, artistic and erotic activities – in short from all creaturely interest (Weber 1978: 542).

Even if monks and nuns would like ideally to stay in their monasteries in order to lead a perfect, contemplative life, they sometimes need to go into the world for economic or religious reasons. The internet can for this reason present a great opportunity to them, because it means they can be present in the world without leaving the monastery. French monks, for instance, who have an economy of production, also need to sell their products outside the monastery. Online selling through the internet can be a very effective way for the monks to reach customers more widely than they can with mail order selling.

¹ In 2001, 60 per cent of internet users were men, whereas they represented only 51.4 per cent of users in 2009 (Médiamétrie 2009).
Thanks to their websites, they can acquire a new visibility in the secularized society through a religiously neutral medium. Furthermore, monks intend also to use the internet as a new medium for evangelization. Pope Benedict XVI has even encouraged use of the internet for this purpose: ‘In this field too we [Christian people] are called to proclaim our faith that Christ is God, the Saviour of humanity and of history’, and he invites them ‘confidently and with an informed and responsible creativity, to join the network of relationships which the digital era has made possible’ (Pope Benedict XVI 2011). Monks say it is important for them to be where people are. Yet people go less and less into traditionally religious places, for instance, churches or parishes, which is why monks try to reach them via the internet. Indeed, in an article about the internet and Facebook in the monastery, a German Benedictine monk explains: ‘In this way we can also speak to people whom we can no longer reach by means of “classical” media (Church journal, parishes letters, . . .)’ (Runge 2011: 217). The question as to whether they actually do reach these people would be a topic for another paper; it is not always easy to know exactly who the people are who consult religious websites (Jonveaux 2007).

Monks, the internet and seclusion: where are they today?
The role of the internet in monasticism is nevertheless a delicate topic because it poses potential dangers to the essence of the monastic life. First of all, as I have already said, the monastic life is, according to Max Weber, theoretically an out-of-the-world asceticism. This means that monks go out of the world, not because they think the world is bad, but in order to find the peace and quiet, and also the independence necessary for contemplation. Seclusion in this sense will be a protection of monastic tranquility. As Raymond Boudon says: ‘Seclusion protects the utopian society against the corruption from outside and against the threat of strangers’ (Boudon 1986).

But the internet abolishes categories of space and time and simply over-rides the terms of the seclusion. As a consequence, in order to maintain the fundamental characteristics of monastic life, monks and nuns have to find a way to protect their seclusion as they make use of the internet. It is for this reason that almost all French monastic communities do not permit internet access in the cells. A monk of Solesmes, a strict Benedictine community in France affirms: ‘It would be naturally totally paradoxical to have internet in the cell.’ That does not mean that monks and nuns do not have access to the internet but usually, these communities have set up an information technology room equipped with computers. This also can involve peer control between monks who can see if one of them spends a long time surfing on the internet, or consulting the kinds of pages which would be contrary to monastic life.
Abolishing the constraints of time and space means that the internet can also be a problem in rigorous planning. Time in monastic life is theoretically strictly organized and displayed in prayer, work and community times. There is no place for internet leisure activities. In a lot of monasteries in France – for instance La Pierre-qui-Vire, Tamié or Solesmes – the abbot cuts off the connection after the last office of the day and restores it after the first office of the morning. This way, monks can observe the so-called ‘great silence of the night’, as Saint Benedict expresses it in his rule, which means that nobody can speak after the last office. In Austrian monasteries such a discipline does not exist; almost all monks have internet access in their cells, but they often say that they do not have the choice about this. For monks for instance who do not have a separate office to work in, they need the internet in their cells, especially when they are working in a parish or at a school. Nevertheless we also can observe some kinds of personal disciplines which the monks try to establish for themselves. For instance, the novice master of Kremsmünster in Austria chooses not to have a computer in his cell and aims not to go into his office after Compline. A young monk in the Cistercian Heiligenkreuz monastery in Austria also said to me he aims to use the internet for no longer than thirty minutes a day and he observes a Facebook ‘fast’ on days of meat abstinence in the community; that is to say Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. We can therefore find a lot of ascetic practices designed to control the use of the internet. This shows that monks hold the internet to be necessary in modern monastic life, as they do not totally renounce it, but at the same time they consider that it can put monastic life in danger if its use is not controlled.

**Facebook: a chance for monastic life?**

The web 2.0, with the greater interactivity it allows, raises new sets of questions for monks about how it can and should be used in religious life. It is for this reason that we have now to investigate how monks and nuns, in community or personally, use the online social networks such as Facebook. I have to specify that I will here especially speak about Austrian monks, because I did not find French monks on Facebook. Again we can deduce that the use of Facebook is linked with the worldly activities of monks, as French monks who do not have many activities in the world also do not use Facebook.

**Monks and monastic communities on Facebook**

First of all we have to make the distinction between community and personal accounts. As we will see it, questions are different if we are speaking about a
page which has been set up for a community and which is often linked to the homepage of the monastery, and the personal page of an individual monk. In the first situation, it relates to the communication policy of the community in respect of the outside world and the visibility it requires, perhaps in respect of pastoral aims. On the other hand, if we are talking about the individual accounts of monks and nuns, they may have the same goals as the whole community, but also at the same time be used personally as a means of communicating with the world.

Of around 55 monasteries in Austria, 9 have a page for the community and the link to it is always put on the website. We could think first that website and Facebook accounts have the same goal and are therefore repetitive, but they may also have different functions and especially aim at different audiences, as we will see later. The use of Facebook seems also to be connected with the general use of the internet, as I did not find an actual page for a French contemplative monastery.

A form of evangelization for young people
In fact, for a lot of monks, Facebook is an important means of establishing and staying in contact with young people. In France, 80 per cent of young people between 13 and 24 are on Facebook. At the same time, it has been shown that this social network becomes the principal means of accessing the web for teenagers. For this reason, it is beyond question for some monks to be on Facebook in order to stay in contact with these young people. But can we really speak about evangelization on Facebook? For monks, Facebook is not a place in which to carry out a long theological discourse, although for instance, a Cistercian monk of Heiligenkreuz says he writes something about the liturgical season or about current themes in the Church in order to highlight religious events and activities. For this community, to communicate on Facebook means especially to introduce a presence as religious people onto the social network. In a German study about Facebook and the Catholic Church it is also noted that 10–20 per cent of people who go to a Church event now get to know about it through Facebook (Pelzer 2012: 32). This would mean that monks have succeeded in reaching this young audience by means of the social network.

Interaction which is allowed on Facebook is exactly the kind of communication young people are looking for. When a monk posts a message on his ‘wall’, people can respond, show if they ‘like’ it and maybe also share the information with other people if they think it might be interesting to them. In this kind of communication, young people think they are also active and this
Facebook as a monastic place?

can produce other kinds of interaction between monks and young people. For instance, monks told me they often receive private messages from young people in which they are asked to explain their views about their lives, their faith and so on. This is significant as such young people would not otherwise get to communicate directly with a priest or a monk.

A new visibility and incarnation of monastic communities

To a greater extent than the homepage, Facebook can be a window on to a community which has the potential to show to the world what it is and what it does. By means of pictures and short but frequent messages, monastic communities and monks can acquire a new visibility in a secularized society. When monks post pictures of themselves playing football or sitting in a cinema wearing 3D glasses on their personalised Facebook walls, it gives a novel, plausible image of monastic life, which is no longer so much different to the one that people live in the world. A lot of monks and priests also post pictures of their religious activities on these sites; for example when they are baptizing a child, or even consecrating the Eucharist. It can, in the first instance, bring God onto the internet – that is to say, render the internet a religious place – but it also interrogates the possibility of desacralisation when there is no longer a difference between religious and profane places, which difference is, according to Mircea Eliade (1965) a characteristic of religion. The internet therefore again raises questions about the territorialization and deterritorialization of religion. Can the internet become a religious place? According to Mircea Eliade, sacred places are characteristically realised by the enactment rituals which have to be observed before one can enter into them (Eliade 1965: 28–9). Yet such is not the case on the internet, where space is almost continuous, apart from locked websites for a particular group or which demand access by payment.

Individual monks on Facebook: which questions for monastic life?

In order to know how individual monks use Facebook and present themselves on this social network, I investigated 50 Facebook profiles of Austrian and German monks and nuns. With an average of 733 ‘friends’, monks and nuns have very much higher than average friend count which in 2011 was generally around the 130 mark. This might initially be somewhat remarkable, if we think that religious people are theoretically out of the world. But such a high number of ‘friends’ is an illustration of the fact that monks and nuns use
Facebook for their pastoral work; sometimes they may have more than 2,000 friends.

**What does it mean to be a monk on Facebook?**

For the most part religious people who are on Facebook are so with a religious goal; as a means of affirming their religious identities. Ninety per cent of monks and nuns of my sample have posted a picture of themselves in a habit for their profile picture and 48 per cent indicate their religious status as well as their name, with the mention of *pater*, brother, *osb*, etc. Forty-four per cent have both of these aspects on their profile.

According to Salvatore Abbruzzese, when monks enter into a religious life, they are going through a process of ‘social desinvestiture’ in order to reach a ‘religious reinvestiture’ (Abbruzzese 2000: 47). When monks assume their religious identities on their Facebook accounts, it means that the ‘religious reinvestiture’ worked. Some nuns and monks try also to adapt Facebook to their religious situation. For instance, I found a nun who described her relationship status as ‘married’ (we have to understand, with Jesus) while a monk says ‘it’s complicated’. We can also find a group entitled: ‘Relationship status: in a relationship with Jesus’. This attempt to adapt – with humour – Facebook to the situation of the religious life proves how monks and nuns want to show their ability to adapt to new technologies. We can also read it as an attempt at achieving plausibility.

**Personal use of Facebook**

Although the homepage of the monastery is a community presentation, Facebook profiles allow monks to present themselves in the world, on the web. I said that this presentation is in major part a religious one, involving pictures of individuals in their habits and with the inclusion of their religious titles. But we have to point out that monks and nuns also use it for a personal presentation of themselves, in terms which do not always connect with their religious lives. 47.7 per cent of religious people in our sample are ‘fans’ of non-religious groups, which may be groups associated with music, sport, and so

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Picture in habit</th>
<th>Religious title</th>
<th>Picture and title</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monks</td>
<td>86.2 %</td>
<td>41.4 %</td>
<td>37.9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuns</td>
<td>95.2 %</td>
<td>57.1 %</td>
<td>52.4 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>90.0 %</td>
<td>48.0 %</td>
<td>44.0 %</td>
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Table 2. Self-presentation in the Facebook profile
forth. A German monk, for instance, is also fan of the Nivea cosmetics brand. A portion of these also show pictures of their personal lives, in non-religious situations (19% of our sample). It has nevertheless to be noted that nuns present themselves on average to a lesser extent than monks: only 25 per cent of them join non-religious groups although for monks the figure is 57.7 per cent. At the same time more than 55 per cent of monks have an almost totally free access to their profile, compared with 47 per cent of nuns. We therefore find again this disparity between nuns and monks and the implicit seclusion which nuns seem to reproduce in their use of new technologies.

When monks stage themselves on Facebook
So some monks post a lot of personal pictures on their Facebook wall. We all know that Facebook is nowadays the perfect place to put oneself ‘on the stage’ and seek to increase self-esteem by means of gaining attention from others. But this can be in contradiction with the monastic life and the seclusion it requires. When some monks post large amounts of pictures and messages on their pages, does it evidence a need to gain recognition outside of the monastery? Pope Benedict, in his latest message for the day of social communications explained:

On the other hand, this is contrasted with the limits typical of digital communication: the one-sidedness of the interaction, the tendency to communicate only some parts of one’s interior world, the risk of constructing a false image of oneself, which can become a form of self-indulgence (Pope Benedict XVI 2011).

Sociologists of communication show that people who are very active on Facebook also seek recognition from others, which can be viewed as a form of narcissism: ‘They would be seeking an audience rather than using Facebook to engage in social interaction with an existing friend’ (Carpenter 2012: 483). Does that mean that monks are searching for recognition outside their communities? In the present context of monastic lives in modern secularized society, this kind of engagement with God is not really recognized by society. Maybe could we say that monks who have a significant level of use on Facebook are searching for this social recognition by means of the exhibiting of their religious and non-religious activities on the web.

Hui-Tzu Grace Chu and Nicholas Edge have also shown in their article that people ‘who are more involved with Facebook are more likely to believe that others are happier and having a better life’ (Chou and Edge 2012). What
would be the consequence for monks in this case? Would they more likely to think that the life in the outside world is better than their own lives? Or, on the other hand, might people think that the lives of monks are better than their own and could they thus be attracted to the monastic life?

This personal use of Facebook by monks and nuns therefore raises some questions about what they are searching for on this social network. Theoretically the religious network could be sufficient for these virtuosi; so what does it mean when monks and nuns need to be integrated into this other virtual social network?

Conclusion

The internet in general redefines some aspects of the monastic life, and its integration in monasteries requires a regulation of its use in order to protect some characteristics of monasteries such as the symbolic seclusion. As internet use in monastic world is still relatively new, monks and nuns do not have an answer to all the questions the internet raises in their religious lives today, but they try at least to point out the questions and reflect on them in order to find solutions. In September I acted as an assistant to the general chapter of a Benedictine congregation and I was able to observe that the internet was an area of debate for these monks, who came from Europe, Africa, India and USA. On the one hand, they asked themselves about what could be deemed to be reasonable usage of the internet in monastic life, but they were also concerned with the necessity to communicate through this media and especially to have a homepage for their congregations.

The social network of Facebook is an especially good place to explore the questions which the internet asks in the context of the monastic life, as well as the different ways communities or individual monks can use these new technologies. It also permits an interrogation of the new relationships which are springing up between monasteries and the world and the perceptions of monks of their own identities in a secularized society. Indeed, the internet offers a clear mirror of the problems of modern monasticism.
Facebook as a monastic place?

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Studying religious music at the grassroots level
A look into the discourse practices of Christian metal bands online

Religious issues are studied in various ways, most prominently by sociologists of religion. This paper suggests that in today's world of globally intersecting webs of people, places, ideas and action, scholars and readers interested in religion will find themselves benefiting from cross-disciplinary approaches which help them to conceptualize and describe today's phenomena at different levels. This paper describes how the emerging discipline of the sociology of language and religion may be applied to studying Christian metal bands' discourse online.

Background

Towards the end of the twentieth century, the world was being described as a global village. It has not been until the twenty-first century, however, that this has truly become the state of the art: never before has the world seen such an amount and variety of transnational mobilities (cf. Vertovec 2009). The media and ICTs play a central role for the formation of network societies (Castells 1996) as well as for today's religiosities (e.g. Campbell 2010a, Cheong et al. 2012). For researchers, this has meant the need to conceptualize traditional issues in new ways. For example, 'spirituality', once seen as a counteraction to traditional religions, is now defined as a term covering a diversity of 'spiritualities' expressed in various ways in different places (e.g. Vincett and Woodhead 2010). On the other hand, some forms of religion have extended globally with 'intensified transnational links' (Lehmann 2010: 415) being created between different localities.

Simultaneously with and following on from the 'discursive' turn in social scientific thought from around 1960 onwards, increasing attention has been paid to an analysis of discourses, narratives, communication and interaction. This move foregrounded interdisciplinary approaches touching on social
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psychology and media and communication studies, among others. Moreover, especially in the field of religion and popular culture, the fields of cultural studies as well as music, film and art studies come close to each other. As a result of the discursive turn, sociolinguistics (especially at the macro level, therefore often called sociology of language) has also started looking more closely into how language was in fact used in different types of situational contexts. Distinguishing religion as a domain of its own, one of the major outcomes in such studies was the observation that language use varied between religious and non-religious settings: in church, the so-called 'high' language variety (e.g. centuries ago, Latin in many European churches) was the norm of use, while the 'low' variety (e.g. English, German, etc.) was used within the private sphere.

Further, towards the end of the twentieth century, interest in the social dimensions of language had led to the recognition of discourse studies as a discipline of its own. However, in this line of inquiry only a small amount of research is done today on the language practices related to religion and popular culture. One example is Tope Omoniyi’s (2010a) work on 'holy hip-hop', the appropriation of hip-hop music and subcultural styles of performance for religious purposes by Christian and Muslim youths in Britain. Omoniyi locates this piece of work in the emerging interdisciplinary discipline of the sociology of language and religion (SLR), which he, together with the well-known scholar of the sociology of language, Joshua Fishman, has been influential in developing (Omoniyi and Fishman 2006, Omoniyi 2010b). Fishman (2006) sets the agenda for SLR to study questions related to both language and religion in his foundational paper, which is summarized in the following.

1. ‘The language of religion always functions within a larger multilingual/multivarietal repertoire.’ This means that there are also other ways of speaking, other registers, and diverse discourses available for the members of any socioculture. Thus, one thing SLR does is that it analyses patterns of how language uses vary between religious and non-religious contexts (Fishman 2006: 14).

2. This variation happens both within societies and between them, and it varies over time as well, as does the degree of religiosity versus secularism within and between sociocultures (Fishman 2006: 15).

3. Religious languages/varieties are more stable than others and impact their secular counterparts more than the other way round. Therefore, for example,
‘revised and updated translations of sacred texts . . . make them more understandable, but in the minds of some, make them less suitable for the sacred functions with which their predecessors were long associated’ (Fishman 2006: 16–17).

4. ‘A by-product of all the foregoing characteristics of long-standing vernacular translations is their acquisition of a degree of sanctity of their own’ as they come to be associated with holy contexts – they become sanctified (Fishman 2006: 17; see also Fishman 2002).

5. The rise and spread of these newly sanctified varieties within the sociolinguistic repertoire of a speech community is met with varying degrees of acceptance and utilization – or of rejection and detachment. The pressure on religion to change (or not) in line with the surrounding social structures and reality fuels language shift but also language maintenance (Fishman 2006: 17–18). Relatedly,

6. ‘All sources of sociocultural change are also sources of change in the sociolinguistic repertoire vis-à-vis religion, including religious change per se.’ This is of course a two-way process, as language dispersal is ‘the most common carrier of sociocultural change’ (Fishman 2006: 18–20).

7. However, social and sociocultural change is a long process and not evenly spread, which is why multiple religious varieties may co-exist within the same religious community (Fishman 2006: 20–1).

8. The sanctified and co-sanctified languages have a major conservative influence on the speed and direction of corpus planning and frequently serve as a counterweight to modernization emphases in the language-planning arena (Fishman 2006: 21–2).

9. ‘The languages and varieties of religious functions are not as eternally unchanging as their custodians often imply.’ However, the constant efforts at updating the variety of Englishes in which the Bible is published are ‘self-defeating, not only because language change will never cease – but also because the act of rendering mysteries more understandable also demystifies and desanctifies them’ (Fishman 2006: 22–3).
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10. Religious emphases and varieties ebb and flow and so do their impact on non-religious usage, and vice versa (Fishman 2006: 23–4).

Fishman’s Decalogue, as he wittily calls it, is a fruitful framework for scholars studying the use(s) of language(s) in religious settings and religious discourse more generally, also. It is a framework which, similar to the sociology of language and to the sociology of religion, tries to analyse and describe macro-level phenomena related to the interconnectedness of language and religion. Some of Fishman’s principles may appear challenging or irrelevant for others than (socio-)linguists, which is because of the strong influence of the sociology of language on this paradigm. For example, language maintenance/shift and language variation and change are key concepts within the sociology of language. However, Fishman successfully combines these issues with questions of religion as a form of social organization, which is why sociologists of religion may also find them useful and relevant.

From the perspective of discourse studies, perhaps the most important aspect in Fishman’s framework is the view of language as constitutional and constructivist. This means that language is here seen as both reproducing and transforming prevalent ways of grasping the world and established social practices (e.g. the practice of religiosity). This shows most clearly in the way the dialectics of language change and sociocultural change are posited in principle six: ‘All sources of sociocultural change are also sources of change in the sociolinguistic repertoire vis-à-vis religion, including religious change per se’, and, vice versa, language dispersal is ‘the most common carrier of sociocultural change’ (Fishman 2006: 18). Examples of a sociocultural change relevant from the perspective of this paper include the mediatization of the daily lives of many (Western) people and the establishment of Christian metal music scene. Following Fishman, while these are expected to have their impact on language practices, they also result from changes in the way people use language to engage with the world today.

The framework of SLR provides a theoretical background for research set-ups and a reflective base for discussing the findings. However, not all principles may be equally important in each study: as Fishman argues himself, the framework should be tested and, if need be, modified, as it is an ‘opener’ for the emerging discipline. Elsewhere (e.g. Jousmäki 2013), I have applied some of the principles of SLR and combined them with a view of ethnography as a theory: according to Jan Blommaert (2005), although ethnography is often understood as a methodological tool especially for collecting research data, the term lends itself for a more theoretical understanding, as well. Relying on
‘critical’ anthropology (e.g. Hymes 1974), Blommaert interprets small phenomena as \textit{indexical} of more general issues. Within religious studies similarly, Kim Knott (2010: 29) encourages a focus ‘on particular, small-scale examples’, the analysis of which ‘can help us to see larger questions, movements and relationships’ related to religious issues. Also David Lehmann (2010) differs from those who view social change as the outcome of top-down processes (e.g. Beyer 1994) and recommends also taking into account bottom-up, grassroots action as (possibly) leading to wider practices – even, perhaps, to social change. In the following section, I review the potential of SLR to the analysis of the discursive construction of religious music in online media, with a particular focus on the construction of subcultural identities.

\begin{center}
A discourse approach on Christian metal
\end{center}

Apart from Omoniyi (2010a), religious music has thus far been mostly studied within musicology (e.g. Bossius \textit{et al.} 2011, Bossius 2003, Harper 2003) and the sociology of religion (Häger 2001, Moberg 2009). Young people, language and religion online have been of interest, for example, to Heidi Campbell (2010b) and Saija Peuronen (2011). However, religion, music and online media discourse have not been addressed previously. The literature on Christian metal is not very extensive, either. Apart from Marcus Moberg’s (2009) extensive analysis of the Christian metal scene and its meanings and functions, most writing on the topic is somewhat outdated and tends to focus either on metal music in general, thus marginalizing Christian metal at the outset (e.g. Larkin 1992, Walser 1993, Weinstein 2000), or on the societal and historical position of the phenomenon (e.g. Gormly 2003, Luhr 2005). Although previous studies thus give a good idea of the structures, practices and tendencies in and related to Christian metal, little is reported on what happens at the very micro-level of Christian metal – for example, how they represent themselves to their audiences, what they sing about, and what else they say and, importantly, how they say it. To fill this gap, I have examined Christian metal bands’ online presence with a particular interest in how the bands utilize online spaces to build up Christian metal identity and culture with the help of textual, discursive, and multimodal resources. This has included a look at the online self-representation of Christian metal bands, a more detailed investigation of the uses of the Bible on bands’ websites, as well as perspectives on an important part of Christian metal; namely the lyrics.

Analysing small-scale phenomena does not mean that their wider socio-historical context is neglected. In the case of Christian metal, its roots go back
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to the 1980s in California, USA, where (Protestant) Christian music was already widening in scope and taking in the sounds of popular music (see e.g. Howard and Streck 1999). Metal music, however, was deemed inappropriate by conservative Evangelical churchgoers (Moberg 2009: 129), which drove the ‘metal missionaries’ (Luhr 2005) to form their own community, the Sanctuary Movement, which allowed its participants to practice religiosity through the sounds and habitus they enjoyed (see Moberg 2009: 128–31).

While it is important to acknowledge this historical and religious background of Christian metal, in an ethnography-driven application of SLR this context should not be taken as final and eternally fixed, however. The notion of ‘context’ is problematic also more generally because what it exactly means necessarily depends on the researcher. Therefore, a more self-conscious term is ‘contextualization.’ (Cf. Blommaert 2005: 39–67; Jousmäki 2012; Silverstein 1992). As regards Christian metal, the diversification of metal music genres (Weinstein 2000), the increase of mediatization and transcultural flows (Pennycook 2007), as well as the different space-times (Fairclough 2003, Harvey 1990) and religo-cultural backgrounds between bands in and outside the origins of Christian metal are only some of the factors that shape the understanding of what ‘context’ means as regards specific aspects of Christian metal today.

Along these lines, I have examined the discourse practices of fifteen North American and Finnish Christian metal bands on their official websites and, to some extent, also in their Myspace, Facebook and Twitter profiles. ‘Discourse practices’ here refers to what Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996: 34) describe as the ‘new realities of the semiotic landscape’ – the multimodal and multisemiotic nature of online discourse. Attention is thereby drawn not only to language, as suggested in SLR, but also to the visual aspects of the discourse (photographs, colouring, graphics) and, to a limited extent, to sound. Moreover, it should be emphasized that whereas Fishman uses the terms ‘language’ or ‘language varieties’ in his formulation of SLR, I have focused on analyzing ‘discourse’ as language-in-use. This makes it possible to consider language and the visual as two interconnected modes that contribute to today’s semiotic reality in Kress and van Leeuwen’s sense above.

The semiotic realities of Christian metal in the virtual world

Overall, an online presence seems to form some of the basis of being a band today, and this goes for Christian metal as well: Christian metal bands navi-
gate the world wide web in a fashion similar to other bands, in order to make themselves known and to represent themselves as metal musicians. In different forms of online (social) media, they find contemporary niches to promote their work as a band. The so-called ‘band hood’; being a group of metal musicians, shows itself particularly well in the ways the bands are depicted in the photographs published online: meant for press release, promotional band photos on these sites typically involve a frontal, low angle, which constructs the band as superior to the audience. The metal band hood is also constructed through using specific typeface, logos, and colours, as well as through complying with the band homepage genre as regards the contents of the site: they most often feature band biography, a store, a section for the latest news, plus audio material (see Jousmäki, forthcoming a). The Christian metal band hood is brought forward through reproducing song lyrics online. It is exactly in the realm of lyrics where the music is made ‘Christian’ – musically, there is no notable difference between Christian and non-Christian metal bands. This makes it possible for listeners to check what the bands establish in and through their lyrics, since the style of singing specific to metal – also called growling – makes it at times difficult to make sense of what the vocalists are, in fact, saying.

Inclusion of the lyrics on the homepage is a way for some bands to indicate their ideological anchoring and to explicitly promote Christian values. Often, the lyrics involve various ways of using verses and ideas from the Bible, but the Bible is also manifest elsewhere on several homepages, most notably on the opening page. While the Bible is sometimes quoted word for word, especially on the opening page, at times the biblical origins of Christian metal ‘texts’ are more explicit. This is the case for instance when lyrics are thematically built around the Bible but delivered in the words of today’s metal musicians. In analysing such practices, two things help: first, the analyst being acquainted with the Bible, in order to recognize themes, ideas and sayings stemming from the Bible, and two, the simple fact that Christian metal lyrics often end with explicit references to the Bible which then become clues for the analysts’ empirical exploration. As a result, the Bible seems to play an important role for these groups: at times, it is used as a source of inspiration for songwriting and for the creation of other textual and multimodal artefacts. Sometimes it is also used as an authoritative source for the thoughts expressed in songs and a landmark for manifesting the spiritual stance and identification of the bands. Finally, biblical passages are also used as a tool in practising religiosity, as is the case when ancient, Bible-based prayers are embedded in songs and made thereby relevant for today’s spirituality, as well (see Jousmäki 2012).
Another aspect of how Christian metal lyrics work as religious practice is concerned with the sharing of 'good news'. A recurrent theme in Christian metal lyrics is the construction of spiritual quest. This may be interpreted as a conscious, dialogical act through which bands address their listeners both searching for the meaning of life and fascinated by (what is supposedly) the evil, thereby explicitly guiding them towards a spiritual conversion – in the evangelical Christian sense, where ‘the individual enters into a personal relationship with God’s only son, Jesus Christ, and is saved through the latter’s atoning work on the cross’ (Woodhead 2010: 225). Moreover, such songs are dialogic in Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1984) sense of the word, in responding to subcultural and ideological debates around metal music and in society more widely. Analysis of dialogicality may be carried out for example through analyzing the uses of pronouns and different voices (cf. Jørgensen and Phillips 2002) in written lyrics, as well as through paying attention to the aural voice, that is, to the sounds and vocal practices in the songs to understand dialogicality at different levels (see Jousmäki 2013).

Despite this missionary agenda (cf. Luhr 2005), Christian metal is also constructed as a rather closed community in some song lyrics. This is the case when less favourable alternatives are presented for those who do not repent in the manner described above. While such drawing of boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is essential for the construction and maintenance of identities (Lehmann 2010: 409; Woodward 1997), the issue becomes problematic when it involves the idea of the Other as inherently different and inferior – in Stuart Hall’s (1997) terms, as spectacular. Viewing the Other in such a way lends ‘them’ the position of the subordinate, the target of action (the extreme examples of this are colonialism and racism). Paying attention to such micro-level phenomena as the use of pronouns and word choices shows that, in Christian metal lyrics, ‘othering’ works through describing ‘us’ as superior to ‘them’; through portraying ‘our God’ as better than ‘their god’ (note the difference between the initial letters); and through depicting ‘us’ with a bright future whereas ‘theirs’ is represented as a dead end (quite literally, too) (see Jousmäki 2011). Christian metal thus seems to encourage a categorical worldview with binary oppositions such as good–evil, heaven–hell, and, importantly, us–them. In doing so, Christian metal resonates with conservative Christian values on the one hand and with the uncompromising register of metal music on the other.
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Discussion

The four cases discussed in this paper illustrate how a small-scale analysis is helpful for shedding light on wider practices and ideologies (cf. Knott 2010: 29). The particular small-scale interests included visuality (e.g. colours, photographs, images, and symbols), biblical discourse, dialogicality and voice, as well as pronouns. Analysing them shows that Christian metal is what it says to be – a fusion of Christian beliefs and values and the musical and aesthetic conventions of metal music culture. While this has already been recognized in previous literature (e.g. Moberg 2009, Luhr 2005), nothing has been said on the question how this shows at the grassroots level of discourse where self-representation and communication take place. This is the gap the cases discussed in this paper fill, through showing that the fusion of Christianity and metal involves particular ways of re-using the Bible, a tendency towards binary thinking, a missionary nature, as well as metal-style soundscapes, visuality, and embodied habitus.

What, then, of the potential of SLR in the analysis of the discursive construction of religious music in online media? Although Fishman (2006) does not acknowledge online media per se in the proposed framework, his discussion on the dialectic relationship between language and sociocultural reality and change makes SLR also relevant for the study of online contexts. This said, the online context does not alter Christian metal as a phenomenon, but intensifies the translocal character of the scene (cf. Jousmäki forthcoming b). From a research perspective, however, the online media context necessitates a focus on the representational character of the scene (cf. Jousmäki forthcoming b). Christian metal bands not merely ‘are’ online – they do so in certain, more or less self-conscious and professional ways, all of which contribute to their performance as and to the discursive construction of Christian metallovers.

Following from the neglect of online media and technological devices in Fishman’s framework, whereas SLR emphasizes ‘language’ as the main object of interest, the analysis of religious music online discourse calls for a more multi-dimensional analysis which puts less emphasis on ‘language’ in the traditional sense. Instead, analysis needs to be conducted (albeit eclectically) from multimodal and multisemiotic perspectives, on linguistic, textual, visual, aural, and discursive levels. This is crucial to an understanding of the formation and practices of contemporary religious music subcultures in their mediated semiotic realities.
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HENNA JOUSMÄKI


Woodward, Kathryn
New religious movements and alternative religions in France

The use of digital media as a counter-strategy against social and legal exclusion

Introduction

In comparison to TV, radio and newspapers the combination of digital and ‘new’ media such as the internet provide a relatively democratic means of distributing information and express opinions in a variety of forms, all having a potentially worldwide coverage. There is also the capability also to use pictures, video and audio files increases the range of impressions which may be mediated to the addressee, and thus to present information in a more vivid and intuitively accessible way. There are plentiful examples of this, ranging from reports of fan behaviour in Poland at the 2012 UEFA European Football Championship, to unofficial reports from of the ‘Arab Spring’ (for further reading, see Hänska-Ahy and Shapour 2013). The internet is widely used internationally by individuals and groups who otherwise perceive and experience a lack of influence and even repression by authorities and whose opinions remain invisible in or are ignored by the mass media. The new media are a frequently-used means of expression in the political struggles of social and religious movements, especially as part of attempts to increase the number of supporters and to mobilise public opinion. The extent, of the usage as well as its degree of success, does vary and because of this variety, a comparative analysis can illuminate parts of the whole conflictuous configuration as well as the chances and limits of resistance and opposition via these media channels. Organisations which were chosen to be investigated here were the so-called ‘new religious movements’, or more precisely, the many forms of alternative religion in France who face significant levels of social and legal exclusion, while most of their members are themselves usually strongly committed to democracy and their identities as equal French citizens. Therefore, they choose to perform counter-actions which are within the law and act strategically, which makes them a special case compared to revolutionary political movements which may question the social order of the state as a whole.
France, with its ‘anti-cult’ policy, has come to a unique standing within the Western world in this respect. Though religious freedom and state neutrality in relation to religious issues are constitutionally granted, a differentiation is made – and partially even legally enforced – between good religions and harmful ones which attempt to manipulate their adepts mentally. The roots of the respective developments in a democratic state can rather be tracked back mainly to specific social and political actors who were able to cooperate with the public media in shaping public opinion than to a monolithic state ideology (see Altglas in Barker 2008). Thus, the debates are held in a constant dynamic between the struggling parties of ‘anti-cult’ movements (hereafter referred to as ‘ACM’s) and alternative religions (new religious movements and alternative therapies and spiritualities will be simplified as ‘NRM’s, or will be more broadly referred to as ‘alternative religions’). The exclusion of the latter from the mass media is revealed be one central means of hindering them from gaining approval within society, because positive portrayals which might counterbalance the widespread negative public view are prevented.

Two umbrella associations of and for NRMs in France have been formed in opposition to French ‘anti-cult’ activism and therefore have also started to make use of the relatively unregulated and uncontrolled internet, including social online networks and digital media. An investigation into how they do this and how far they are and potentially can be successful is the main focus of the following article. During this first, relatively open and mainly empirical analysis, it is revealed that apart from other, not explicitly claimed functions, the two main purposes of the association’s work are to provide practical support for victims, as well as balance the media discourse, by providing informa-

1 For a brief history of the development of ‘anti-cult’ activities from the perspective of Union Nationale des Associations de Défense des Familles et le l’Individu Victimes de Sectes (UNADFI), see UNADFI website. One of the earliest investigations on the matter is Beckford 1985.

2 For a detailed, actor-focused description of the history and further discussion of this argument see my PhD thesis (still in progress).

3 The term ‘new religious movements’ (NRMs) has been the classic signifying term used by scholars of the sociology of religion occupied with ‘cult’ debates in various countries and it is kept in use here for the purpose of connecting partly to this scholarly discourse, which has produced most of the available scholarly knowledge on the topic. Nevertheless, substantially it rather designates movements and thus does not display sufficiently the developments within the religious field of the last twenty or thirty years towards more and more weak institutionalisation and non-communal structures. Therefore, the expression ‘alternative religions’ is used here at the same time, explicitly intending to pay regard to these changes and to include weakly institutionalised beliefs and practices.
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tion and distributing expressing their own opinions. Starting from the finding of the centrality of the problem of exclusion from public discourse, initially a description of the more general historical development of the social (medial) and strongly connected legal exclusion of alternative religions in France will be given, followed by an analysis of the use of digital media by the two main associations: The Centre d’Information et de Conseil des Nouvelles Spiritualités (CICNS, ‘Information Centre and Council of New Spiritualities’ – it is an NGO with consultant status within the UN) and the Coordination des Associations & Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience (CAP LC, ‘Coordination of Associations and People for Freedom of Conscience’). The results will be discussed with a special focus on the differences between the two organisations and the limits of and conditions necessary for an effective use of digital media in this case. The final evaluation of the latter has been undertaken against the backlash against the actual success of these organisations, which has been rather scarce concerning attracting the interest of the public, the mass media and authorities, while searching for possible explanations within the current progress of the debates themselves and within media theory.

The development of the French ‘cult’ debates

The emergence of NRMs in the second wave of the late 1960s – traditionally characterised either by charismatic leadership and strong group cohesion or extra-ordinarily loose group cohesion and a network structure close to ‘New Age’ forms of belief and practices in connection with alternative forms of therapy in a wide variety – has led to so-called ‘cult debates’ in France in a fashion similar to other countries. A lot of mainly newly-developing religious groups were labelled as sectes, meaning, basically, that they were viewed as harmful and dangerous groups, especially regarding their attractiveness to younger people, whom they were suspected to be ‘brainwashing’ and stripping of their financial means and personal freedoms. In France these debates became apparent in the late 1970s and led, following the Enquête Report (Gest and Guyard 1996), in which 173 dangerous groups in the ‘Western world’ were named, to a quite unique ‘anti-sect’ legislation, concentrated in the About-Picard law of 2001. Among the names of NRMs that were counted among the sectes were well-known groups such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Raelian Movement, Silva Mind Control, Children of God, ISKON, Scientology, and many from the ‘New Age’ and New Esotericism spectrum, but a majority had French origins or were mainly located in France, including La Fraternité Blanche Universelle, La Fraternité Notre Dame, or L’Invitation à la Vie Intense.
The conflicts started in relation to adepts of NRMs who left their families to follow a group; their relatives were often most concerned and feared the worst for their, quite often over-25-years-old, children or spouses. This, along with one case of suicide, initially motivated the foundation of the so-called ACM in the early 1980s, which in France held atheist as well as Catholic ideals. From then on, for the next fifteen years, they were the main organisation for opponents NRMs, whose activism consisted mainly of reporting any negative information about said-to-be suspicious groups, substantiated or not, to employers of individual persons, as well as other means of public defamation. Most importantly, they also offered consultation for ‘victims’ and also became the major informants for the mainstream or mass media, sending sometimes up to 500 faxes per day. This was possible, because, after an initial, widely-read newspaper article which secured them primary authority on the question and was published at the very beginning in 1978, most people addressed them with their concerns related to sectes. Consequently, for the most part information accumulated not among scholars but most swiftly within the ACM, which had seemingly no interest in ascertaining whether this information would always prove to be true. Further, TV talk-shows on the topic were placed in situ, where ‘victims’ and ‘experts’ were often portrayed accompanied by respective gloomy music and scary images. In short, it was often unverified information as well as mere rumours which were disseminated and therefore shaped the picture of alternative religion in the public domain, while the negative picture was also actively constructed in and through the mainstream media. This to some extent inflamed people’s fears to the degree that incidents in terms of attacks by civil persons on spiritual centres or even people on the street (in at least one case with a fatal consequence), made simply existing very difficult for many suspected groups who found it hard to rent rooms for worship, for example, or were threatened with prohibitive levels of taxation.

NRMs, small spiritual communities and even psychotherapists with more unconventional approaches very soon also found their voices and opinions being rigidly excluded from the mainstream mass-media, while newspapers, radio and television provided a huge and effective platform for their opponents to distribute their respective views.

When in 1993 and 1994, about 15 years later, members of the Solar Temple committed suicide or were killed, finally the French state started its investigations into the issue. The implementation of the About-Picard law in 2001 following the 1995 Enquête report (see Gest and Guyard 1995), was not the be-

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4 Cf. UNADFI history (accessed 29.10.2012).
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ginning of conflicts being carried out in courts, but a turn that put even more legal pressure on NRMs and moreover, it functioned for suspected groups in a very unfavourable way: it was a symbolic act in which, despite its questionable functionality, the French state confirmed that a 'sectarian danger' actually exists. As a result, the criminal potential of NRMs was more than ever manifest as a basic assumption in the discourse, which means that no one could say something neutral or positive without at the same time distancing themselves from potential but as yet uncommitted crimes. For those people which were indifferent towards the topic, there was now also a strong excuse for not intervening. The phrase 'Well if they are criminal, they should be punished' is something I got to hear myself more then once.

As the law was met with the passive support and to some extent active approval of the population, of which only very few actually were personally affected or even have had personal contact to any member or believer, the negative media coverage is to be seen as a key issue and a major problem for NRMs. Within the media and public discourse NRMs were (and are still) referred to by means of the pejorative term _sectes_ and were thus stigmatised _per se_ and more or less coverless objected to the accusations of their opponents. Also, there was basically no-one in France to speak on their behalf because also scholars of religious studies or the sociology of religion remained unheard. According to interviews carried out by Susan Palmer (2008), for scholars (as well as for politicians), speaking out loudly was an easy way to limit their career opportunities.

What were the means available to the NRMs, being excluded from the regular media channels, to balance the negative media coverage that designated them as dangerous cults in public opinion? They were legal means – going to court in cases of defamation – which they had already been using for a long time, if they could afford to. Still, their successes rarely got coverage in the mainstream media. Their means of self-presentation initially had consisted of demonstrations, flyers, partly scholarly and, more regularly, publications which presented information from their point of view and had 'homiletic’ as well as accusing notions. As a further means to spread information, e-mail lists were subsequently used – in sum, media which could distribute information and self-representation only within a relatively short range. They partly demand personal contact or physical presence, while the limited numbers of readers/listeners were spread all over France and probably had at first rather limited opportunities for internet access.
The use of the internet and digital media

Since around the year 2000, when the use of the internet and digital media became very easy and widespread, the two associations working on the support of NRMs or alternative religions in France, the CAP LC (Coordination des Associations & Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience) and the CICNS (Centre d’Information et de Conseil des Nouvelles Spiritualités), launched their own websites. The web presences of both organisations will in what follows firstly be described in terms of their contents, and secondly analysed in terms of their functions, specifically in their intended and potential functions as well as in their actual functionality. The foci for the latter were mainly placed on the self-presentation of the organisation (‘who are we?’; ‘what aims do we want to achieve?’ and ‘which strategies do we prefer?’) and to whom they addressed themselves, explicitly and implicitly, and in which way. Further, what sources are provided in which forms, the contact possibilities they offer, the visual appeal of the website, other offers such as different languages, as well as possibilities for personal meeting have been taken into account, as those may, in addition to the potential and intended functionality, already illuminate aspects of the factual effects, while the final evaluation and attempts to explain the situation have been left for the summary and discussion.

The web presence of the CAP LC and the CICNS

The CAP LC is the older of the two associations and it developed out of the organisation ‘FIREPHIM’ (Fédération Internationale des Religions et Philosophie Minoritaires) in the context of the much more aggressive pre-2001 struggles (for FIREPHIM see Altglas in Barker 2008, cf. Palmer 2011). These years witnessed plenty of not fully legal civil activism (Palmer 2011: 97–8) and ‘Mediabolisation’ (a term used by Palmer, see 2008 and 2011: 33ff.), as well as the use of diverse legal strategies against NRMs. On the other hand, the NRMs themselves went to court. The organisation has a clear agenda of defence against the perceived suppression of NRMs in France, offering practical, legal and moral support for victims of discrimination. It also provides information about current events on its websites and through a newsletter.

This had already started in the latter stages of the 1990s, as a direct means of defence against civil and legal attacks at a time when these were much more acute (comp. Becourt 2002: 1ff.) Hence, it is mainly potential victims who are addressed in their own writings, directly and indirectly. To this day

Cf. the CAP LC charter on their homepage (accessed 23.10.2012).
it continues to direct most of its efforts into research and counselling on legal questions, as well as on establishing contacts between NRMs or individuals who feel threatened by media or the law and lawyers are established in cases of need. Emphasis is also placed on providing moral support and there are various email contacts available for information on different problems and issues and thus also the opportunity to share experiences is provided. This service is run mainly by members of those NRMs who had already been the main targets in earlier stages of the struggle and have had their own damaging encounters with discrimination.

The main page starts with currently debated issues and links to recently released brochures and blogs, followed by the charter of the CAP LC, contact information and an invitation to make contact. On the left side, one can choose different kinds of information from links to primary documents such as petitions, summaries on law cases, further web-links, newspaper articles, videos of parliamentary discussions and secondary literature. Further, an editorial outlining current events and other self generated writings are offered. In short, the CAP LC web presence addresses potential or actual victims, gathers and provides news on incidents and the actual progress of the debates as well as offering its own opinions and links to secondary literature, but mainly provides information in the form of primary sources. The web presence is fairly small, and the main language is French, while some parts of it are translated into English.

By contrast with the CAP LC, the Centre d’Information et de Conseil des Nouvelles Spiritualités (CICNS), founded in 2004, explicitly addresses NRMs and alternative religions, but also emphasises the importance of distributing information to a wider audience including the authorities and the (mass) media.⁷ It was, having initially been planned as a local sub-group of the CAP LC, finally launched as an independent project in 2004 by ‘a dozen volunteers’,⁸ representing NRMs and alternative religions, with special emphasis on ‘New-Age’-related beliefs and practices. These are referred to as ‘new spiritualities’ (nouvelles spiritualités),⁹ as distinct from the ‘old’ traditional religions and the term ‘spiritualities’ which is in common use in French discourse.¹⁰ Further, the CICNS determinedly draws on peaceful strategies in

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¹⁰ Religious communities, which are not officially recognised as such usually register themselves in France as ‘associations déclarée’ which can then be voluntarily name ‘spirituelles’.
order to oppose discrimination and has seemingly the view that the new spiri-
tualities are relatively homogenous, or at least close to each other,\textsuperscript{11} indicating that there is not merely common ground in the opposition to repression (more the notion of the CAP LC), but that some kind of intrinsic community between the different NRMs exists. They offer some practical help or advice and are closely working together with lawyers for practical purposes, but, more significantly, with them as experts along with reputable scholars of the sociology of religion and with groups and individuals from various points on the alternative religious spectrum who provide their own comments on and partial analyses of various issues. All contributors, but not the core team, are openly introduced on the website, which itself is more systematically struc-
tured than that of the CAP LC.

It begins on its main page with a video introduction of the CICNS, further links to the FAQs and contact information. On the left we find a column with other subordinated topics – the charter which has been cited above, descriptions of the situation, problems and conflicts, followed by an analysis of the history of the French ‘cult’ debates. The terms and concepts used in the public debate, clearly take the point of view of the NRMs, aiming at deciphering what might be perceived as ‘real’ by the public as an ideological debate which is using false arguments. About eighty comments and scholarly papers on a range of issues can be found in all, as well as plenty of videos with expert interviews, testimonies and self-presentations by groups and individuals, followed by a detailed portrayal of actor-groups campaigning against NRMs, produced by the CICNS, and a list of websites from pro-NRM associations. In the end we find the information to which the CICNS addresses itself, a bibliography and a collection of CICNS newsletters that come out about twice a month and an editorials archive. Further, a Facebook page exists as an alternative to the newsletter for receiving news regularly.

The newsletters and other informative material is further said to be sent regularly to the authorities, elected officials, media, various organisations and personalities, as well as to the spiritual movements themselves. An overview about related book publications is also provided and the contents of the site are in the French language, while the self-presentation as an association is also available in English language. There are some primary sources available, but the focus is clearly on secondary texts.

\textsuperscript{11} CICNS new spiritualities (accessed 24.10.2012).
The different purposes and functions of the websites

As described above, the CAP LC emphasises practical defence against discrimination of NRMs and alternative religions in France. Hence, the self-claimed central function of their website is to be a platform which enables contacts with the association for people who feel threatened or are in serious trouble and need moral and legal support. As everyone stays more or less anonymous and contacts are established via email, phone or postal contact, it does not serve as an open platform for free networking between people. The web presence is rather functional, so one might even say that seemingly less effort has been expended on the web page design than on the contents that are provided. The links provided in sum constitute first of all a huge database, which provides people who have an an interest in primary sources with material which they can use to research the topic and get the information they desire. This audience would be members, groups, or individuals under social and/or legal pressure who want better to understand their own and the overall situation as well as the possible courses of action; for example scholars or lawyers or anyone else who needs information in order become active.

Moral support can be found in the associations’ own writings, which provide alternative interpretations and which are mainly somewhat different from those of the mainstream, as well as emphasising the right to the free choice of beliefs. Sarcastic mocking of ACM or MIVILUDES-members\(^{12}\) are quite common, and the successes of NRMs, which exist but are rarely reported in the mass media are reported and celebrated on these websites.

Thus, the main impression, backed by the findings, that the web presence is rather directed at the ‘inside’ or to a special audience than towards the public remains, though they are also said to send press releases and organise meetings which are in theory open to everyone. However, most of the activities related to their web presence serve the super-ordinate community of those NRMs who feel threatened by meeting their demands for information and support and, most importantly, raising awareness of itself as a larger entity of people with the same problems and interests in relation to the ACM and the French state. This can include people who range from being neutral to positively interested (and for example make use of the huge data collection), who might distribute their opinions in other places and might be given more

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\(^{12}\) MIVILUDES is short for Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les derives sectaires ('Interministerial Mission of Vigilance and Struggle against Cultic Aberrations'). See MIVILUDES homepage.
authority because they are not directly members of a group, but their mobilisation seems to be allowed to develop relatively independently.

The explicitly self-proclaimed aims of the CICNS are going in the other direction: it is said explicitly, that they try to balance the mainstream discourse through 1) 'providing neutral to positive information about spiritualities and alternative healing methods,' as well as 'promoting spiritual worldviews' and 2) they aim to 'enlighten the power structures and onesidedness of their representation in the mainstream media,' 3) the provision of 'information about discriminatory acts and counsel for those whom they regard as victims,' 4) 'in order to gain attention from the authorities, criticising French society as a whole.'

To points 3 and 4 it should also be reported that information is also given about not directly secte-related discrimination by officials in other areas such as compulsory hospitalisation.

Examples for all these claims made in the self-presentation can be found in the web presence. Further, the websites contain much less discussion of legal issues and overall slightly fewer primary sources compared to the numbers of academic secondary texts. Multi-media is not only present insofar as other media than text are included, but also to produce videos and commentaries of testimonies and scholars. Hence, the use of the websites, the consumption of information is facilitated and the range of impression (especially relevant for the presentation of testimonies) that is transmittable has widened. The information itself is (since the aim is to balance the contra-NRM conditioning of the other side) to a large extent conditioned, often written by and partly backed by legal, scholarly or other experts.

Also, a consciousness of a community may be created through this website (through a common aim and as contact, help and counselling is offered), but this is seemingly not the main purpose. Attempts to practice open networking are made possible separately through a Facebook page the CICNS has run since February 2011. It currently has fewer than 400 'fans' and gets on average 8 'likes' per post, suggesting that open networking is not the most pressing need or demand, for more or less unknown reasons. In comparison to CAP LC which focusses strongly on legal issues, the CICNS internet presentation is much more outward and discourse oriented, aiming to influence public opinion while mobilising those already signed up is apparently of lesser interest.

To present the different aims and strategies of both organisations in summary, a direct comparison as well as the practical linkage of both is useful. The

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13 Cf. the CICNS charter (accessed 5.6.2012).
CICNS was initially thought of as a sub-association, but decided to become independent due to disagreements on strategy. The CAP LC still refers positively to the CICNS,\textsuperscript{15} while the CICNS reports openly why they are not part of the CAP LC.\textsuperscript{16} The CAP LC is, according to the CICNS, the more combative organisation which emphasises the rights and the value of alternative religions, aiming to mobilise and strengthen public protest and support for their own lines of defence, addressing mainly aggrieved parties. The CICNS wants ‘to operate more peacefully’, which fits with their explicitly expressed aim of influencing the discourse with the help of scholarly and other expert authority. This means communicating, enlightening and convincing, rather than fighting and being involved in legal battles. The CICNS is an NGO with consultant status in the UN, but not within France, where the role of a consultant organisation is filled by the ACM.

Both associations created, apart from other activities, internet platforms which are visible in theory to everyone, where plenty of primary and secondary scholarly material is provided and their views about themselves, the ACM, public opinion and state policy are presented. In this respect, they have both achieved theoretical visibility in the debates by means of digital media.

CAP LC and CICNS both use multi-media on their websites, which notably improves the quality and variety of the presentation of the information provided. This would not have been (as easily) possible before the thorough digitalisation of media. The CAP LC provides mainly ready-made primary material from official sources, while the CICNS produces videos of testimonies and interviews with experts themselves, but they put overall much more effort into presenting the information. Inherently, a more general spiritual message concerning the unity or similarity of many contemporary forms of alternative religion may be detected, while they distance themselves from Scientology, as such an association might hinder them in reaching their aim of achieving public credibility, and presenting themselves as less radical than the CAP LC and creating an image of themselves as a (potential) public player.

\textbf{Summary and conclusion}

To what extent are both of these strategies, but especially that of the CICNS effective? The offer of information, shared opinions and practical assistance as

\textsuperscript{15} CAP LC intervention (accessed 26.10.2012).
\textsuperscript{16} Cf. CICNS new spiritualities (accessed 23.10.2012).
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emphasised mainly by the CAP LC is a factor that makes the situation easier for members of NRMs in France, as it provides a huge amount of informational data and a contact platform where help, opinions from like-minded people and and moral support can be found without being necessarily in personal contact and revealing one’s identity to a broader and maybe unwanted audience. Insofar, the anonymity of the internet, being openly accessible perfectly needs this kind of demands. Likewise, from another perspective, a sense of not being alone but being part of a community may well be perceived as a form of safety and as an encouragement to stick to one’s own beliefs and practices instead of giving in to pressure. Colloquia, conferences and sometimes parties are organised to work on and discuss certain topics and strategies with specialists among themselves and are the place where people can meet each other personally. The mocking of the ACM and MIVILUDE members can function as morally encouraging and is one classical mean of disarming political enemies, here at least in the sight of the own party members. In this respect, the internet presence of the CAP LC enables a broadened political and social community of NRMs. The web presence of the CICNS may function in a similar way to that of CAP LC, though less strongly inwardly oriented through the different emphasises. The main interest here was if each of the web presences, especially taking into account the described aims and efforts of the CICNS is likely to have a significant impact on the public debates in France, that is to say in which ways could information and opinions presented there enter the mainstream discourses? Such influences could develop, if the information is consumed, accepted and maybe spread by either 1) a larger number of people, 2) by some influential individuals with a relatively high degree of credibility or 3) directly by the mainstream media and/or the authorities.

For option one: in the context of ‘new media’ or ‘digital’ media, the internet can be more precisely described through its ‘on-demand’, informative character, meaning here that some kind of demand to know must exist at first, as one will rarely stumble over the website while surfing, if not with a special related interest, and of course, occasionally with a willingness to re-assess one’s own attitude. Leaving to one side the question of the possibility and quality of internet access in France, assuming that the opportunity is widespread, I want to stress the point made before: there are, beside the negative media coverage of NRMs in the mass media which has shaped the opinion of a majority, by now many topics, like the Muslim community in France, which are much more present in the media at the moment. Especially since it is perceived that ‘the state has taken care of it’, interest has seemingly
decreased and many I have talked to consider the criminal potential and the harmfulness of *sectes* as a more or less given fact or are indifferent. Those people already interested in the topic are likely to be members of NRM s and especially those who experience discrimination as well as scholars who may make use of the internet archives and want to be updated. Further, the political opponents of NRM s and maybe French citizens who have become interested or curious for other reasons are potential visitors to these websites. Especially scholars and perhaps also citizens constitute a second option to spread different information and opinion, functioning as possible key persons and inter-mediators. It is those persons who might be well networked and they may also be more easily listened to as they potentially have access to some other platforms. For option three, the mainstream media and authorities are dealt with already by additionally sending press releases and material to the authorities seems to be more promising, but it depends on the willingness to take this information into account. A fourth opportunity is attention from outside of France, in fact many interested scholars are not French and were and are critical towards France’s ‘anti-*secte*’ policy. The European Court of Human Rights (EctHR) can be and is asked for help so the extreme asymmetry of power within France can be outweighed in some cases; the websites may be here indeed a way to respond to interest from outside France, possibly with a certain language barrier.

At this point it can be said that indeed in the era of the internet with its opportunities for self-presentation as well as the digitalisation of media, the relative social isolation of NRM s in France has in theory been overcome. Nevertheless, this is to a large extent only the case insofar as potentially interested persons are now provided with accessible information, partly even in low-threshold formats and options to establish flexible and fast contact. Further, the web presence serves NRM s directly for that purpose with the addition of the relatively fast and easy opportunity to get practical help as well, as they add a visible forum that represents them also as a super-ordinated entity with the same interests. But despite this, the practical effects on the mainstream discourses, understood as taking place in ‘one’ or the major public sphere, seem to be very limited. Compared to the other ways via key persons and sending information directly to authorities and media which relies on the acceptance and co-operation of the ladder, that would be a way to create some kind of ‘grass-roots’ pressure. But what is created instead, would due to the ‘on-demand’ character of the internet rather be covered by the concept ‘public sphericle’ (for an overview, see Macnamara 2008), a special segment of a fragmented public sphere where people who already share this rather special
interest discuss together. The unfolding of its potential to distribute contents beyond this sphericle and thereby either enter other discourses or at least extend it is likely only with an increased success in gaining attention, interest and enhancing personal credibility, which has to be initiated by other means.

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Introduction

This article charts a unique and important phase of media use and meaning-making processes among young people during the first decade of twenty-first century. The rapid changes in media content and consumption have brought about a transformation which impacts on forms of religion and spirituality for young people. In this article I review four studies on the field of religion and the media. Key concepts of the construction of individuality and the narrative of personal biographies are found in all of them. The role of Evangelical Christianity and the core narrative of the apocalypse, as well as the clear polarities of good and evil are analysed in two of the studies which give a description of the global and transnational dimension, while the other two put more emphasis on the local, cultural and historical dimensions.

The significance of the transnational character of religious narratives, the media and popular culture is analysed in reference to a long period of ethnographical inquiry and detailed documentations of the cultural discourses associated with musical subcultures as well as the locality and new media conventions approach in the studies of existential and religious expressions in the mediated environment.

Lynn Schofield Clark (2003) interviewed teenagers and their families in the United States in the period 1996–2002, enquiring into their relationship to entertainment, the media and supernatural themes in these. Mia Lövheim's study (2004) of participators in an internet discussion group describes the unexplored use of new media in the making of religious identity and the processing of it in textual expression in Sweden. Tomas Axelsson's (2008) focus went deeply into the relationships between mainstream popular film culture and the meanings given in individual worldviews. Marcus Moberg's (2009) study of Christian heavy metal musicians describes the dialogue between popular culture and the creation of a special musical space or scene in the religious and artistic expressions of Christian faith and popular, material culture within the media, lifestyle and aesthetic dimensions.
On studying religion, the media and young people

The significance of these studies is the contemporary phenomenon of a recent development of media and popular culture which are central agents in the lives of young people in terms of gaining an understanding of the forms and expressions of spirituality and everyday religion. First, they are studying the relation of young people and the dimension of material culture in contemporary Western society from a broad perspective. Second, they bring in the use of the media, entertainment and popular culture as a seminal part of the grand processes of religious change in late modern society. Questions of the secular, the post-secular and the rise of spiritualities, religious affiliations, the media and institutional religions and their relationships are central to an understanding of the complex world we live, consume and communicate in, in relation to religion and spirituality (see e.g. Morgan 2008; Hjarvard 2008; Lundby 2009; Clark 2003, 2007; Day 2011, 2012; Lövheim 2004, 2007; Lynch 2005, 2007, 2012; Moberg 2009; Moberg and Granholm 2012; Nynäs et al. 2012; Woodhead and Heelas 1998). The question of authenticity and authority over the use of religious symbols and expressions are contested by a set of authorities – religious and media-based (Hoover 2008: 33–4).

Institutional religions are changing ideas with popular culture products which are visible and recognised and thus accessible in terms of emotional identification. In return, popular culture is manufacturing, consuming and melting the beliefs, ideas and narratives of religion and spirituality (see e.g. Frönäs 1995, Lundby 2009, Hoover 2008). The new forms of media and religion are studied inside the triangle constituted by the criteria of youth, popular culture product and ideological or religious institution. The meaning-making process and identity formations that are studied occur in and with the media. Together, popular culture and new media expressions are creating new ground upon which teenagers are expressing or ‘doing’ religion and as such, constructing and expressing ideological and religious identities.

The approach in these studies is built on the concept of a constructionist view of religious identity in the mediated landscape (see e.g. Clark 2003, Lövheim 2004, Axelson 2008, Moberg 2009). From a sociological angle, cultural learning or socialization involves two phases, where the first is led by the family and tradition. In the second phase other agents which have authority in the life of individual – such as school, the media and peer groups – emerge. According to Anthony Giddens (2006: 163–7, 534) the agencies of socialization push the individuation process towards self-awareness. A sense of purpose is one of the three main features in the process of religious socialisation and is the central opposite form in the discussion of the secularization and the role of the media in it (see e.g. Taira 2008, Jenkins 2006). The rise of spiritual-
ity (see e.g. Woodhead and Heelas 1998) and Evangelical Christianity (see e.g. Clark 2003, Moberg 2009) in particular exemplify the interaction of religious institutions and the mass media. The creation of media content for religious and ideological purposes has both positive and negative consequences. The studies approach the discussion of the relation of strategic choices of an individual and larger social change in institutional religions and spirituality. In late modern society religious narratives are circulated along with popular culture products. The dynamics of good and evil and the pursuit of happiness collide and interact in these products and the authority of the use of symbolic content is claimed in several ways in the entertainment media, internet or scene.

Young people, religion and the media, locally and globally

The prevalence of the media in everyday life has changed the way children and adolescents spend their leisure time. The consumption and permeable dimension of the media (see e.g. Lundby 2009, Lynch et al. 2012) is at the centre of our everyday lives: at home, school and work. During the last decade the media environment has been developing swiftly. The typically shared, family-owned media appliances – such as the television, telephone and computer, have been replaced with a multitude of private, personally-owned media devices. This progression has been exceptionally rapid during last ten years and today the mobile phone is a central tool for communication, entertainment and social media representations among teenagers. This development has also privatized the circumstances in which children and young people spend their time.

The transformation and usage of the symbols of the religiously dominant narratives (see e.g. Hjarvard 2008, Clark 2007, Day 2012, Hoover 2008) and of the impact of audience response is an area of interest for the institutions which play key roles in in children's and young people's lives. Moral and ethical narratives are in generally situated in the institutional religion. These core narrative structures (Hjarvard 2008: 158–68) are shaped by and in the media and they are shared both globally and locally. The interaction between individuals and social representations and institutions are discussed, negotiated and represented in popular cultural products including music, television shows, films, games, magazines and the content of digital environments for communication and entertainment. The production and distribution of entertainment and popular culture is transnational and interpretations are
dependent on the terms of interaction between individuals and institutions, cultural, historical, ideological and religious; the emphasis on narration and the audience in specific context and resources and the complexity of these is visible in the studies.

Four approaches, three countries and Christianity: the United States, Sweden and Finland

United States
Media reception studies commonly rely upon the assumption of a direct impact of the media text in question. The media text is analysed, transmitted to the audience and afterwards the audience write their responses. Anthropological approaches have led media researchers also to draw attention to the context that shapes the interpretations of the media. Focusing on religion in the media, Lynn Schofield Clark (2003) has employed ethnographical methods to investigate the role of the supernatural in the United States. A three-stage ethnographical study began with the formation of a research project in 1996 which was finished in 2002. Clark specialised in adolescent and feminist qualitative methods in research design in her study of teens in relation to their families and their media consumption. The teenagers numbered 102 and Clark continued the ethnographical study with five teens and their families which formed the core of her study.

In From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media and the Supernatural (2003) Clark introduces us to the mediated environment as it was at the turn of millennium in the United States. Theories of rational, individual action of choice are challenged by the significance of the circulating public religious symbols of the nation interacting with individual ones and transforming religious narration (Clark 2003: 12–15).

The impact of Protestant Evangelicalism on the mediated landscape is pivotal in the study. Clark discusses the aspect of Evangelicalism in which good and evil dichotomies are present and the narratives of the Apocalypse and the End of Times are one of the most popular, along with the idea of the supernatural. At the same time the potential for Evangelical conversion, religious authority and definitions of morality transforms the discussion of the media towards Christian entertainment and non-Christian entertainment (Clark 2003: 24–37). The relationship between Protestant Evangelicalism and the media brings out questions of the dynamic of being on the side of the right, where the moral winners leave the others behind.
Clark (2007: 78–82) also underlines previous findings that young people are articulating views on moral sustainability and ethical beliefs which are derived from the themes of Protestant Christianity are coming from teenagers who do not claim to belong to any institutional religion. The close relation of religion and morality in United States and the issue of how they are represented in the media also makes it difficult to separate what belongs to institutional religion and to the sphere of spirituality (Clark 2003: 228–36).

The young people who do not identify themselves with institutional religions or traditions, however, do, through products from popular culture, identify and express the same moral narrative structure of good and evil that is characteristic of Protestant Christianity. Entertainment media audiences do not all open their minds to possibilities and the content of entertainment is chosen from the tradition. Most of the teens interviewed understood an openness to possibilities as one of the ideal and mediated belief systems in a multicultural environment.

Freedom of choice and opening up to possibilities in real life are limited by cultural, racial, educational and socio-economic factors. In the US context the beliefs of the teenagers echo the individualism that is represented in the entertainment media and which reproduces the hegemonic profile of the nation. Thus, Clark suggests that an analysis of media consumption should be integrated with ideological and political questions (Clark 2003: 228–36). According to Clark the enjoyable and entertaining question of ‘what if’ and identification with media constructions of belief should be analysed in terms of the negative and narrowing dimension they are promoting.

**Sweden**

Mia Lövheim focuses on the constructive process of religious autobiographies in her study *Intersecting Identities: Young People, Religion, and Interaction on the Internet* (2004). The dynamics of the dominant institutional impact of the media and the concept of constructing identity in late modern society are central. In order to find out about the process of constructing religious identities Lövheim analyses interactions which took place in the religious discussion groups of a Swedish website and shows how interpretations of authenticity are dominant. Analysing the discursive patterns under the topics of religious tradition or ideology, Lövheim finds patterns of asserting authorities and personal experience in the expression of authentic argument (Lövheim 2004: 42, 122–3).

The arguments are valued by the peers in the website groups discussing religious matters in Protestant Christianity, science and reason and the su-
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pernatural as well as new religious movements. The core of insiders and more disparate outsiders is established by the test of religious symbolism and how it is used in their written arguments. Lövheim shows in her analysis how the insider group approves or rejects interpretations, based mainly on the use of the symbolic content of religion (Lövheim 2004: 256).

Discourse analysis, along with semi-structured interviews serves to indicate how symbols and ethical dichotomies, along with an authentification of the sources, become central for the participants in internet discussion groups. In the discussion groups the coherent and credible use of religious symbols, as well as the support of personal website representation are all ways of establishing authority. The use of these discursive tools for forging religious autobiographies underlines some of the features that communicate trustworthiness and authenticity. In order to achieve or maintain a position of influence in the discussion group, competence in text-based discussion is required and this introduces new forms of authority (Lövheim 2004: 252–7 and 2007: 93–5).

The negative side of the group dynamic also emerged. The informant and researcher reconstructed the meaning of text-based discussion conventions and negative experiences within the discussion groups. Interactions on the internet do not seem to differ greatly from daily conventions, though they may sometimes increase the risk of misunderstanding expressed intentions. The study reports on the complexity of individual resources and conditions on the chosen website. The institutional and religious narratives and symbols of a particular society structure the understanding of religion and the dynamics of the construction of religious traditions in the media (Lövheim 2007: 93–7).

In his study, entitled Film och mening. En receptionstudie om spelfilm, filmpublik och existentiella frågor (2008; Movies and Meaning: Studying Audience, Fiction Film and Existential Matters) Tomas Axelson considers the interactions of film audiences, the making of meaning and the construction of belief. By developing reception and audience studies he is able to develop an understanding of belief systems and the existential questions prompted by popular fiction films. The relationship between the media and interpretations of the products of popular culture throws light on the social interactions between audiences and films and how films relate to the construction of meaning.

Axelson employs methods from media and film studies, psychology, social psychology, sociology and theology. The audience studies approach was motivated by the design of a research project on a film audience made up of 197 Swedish university students and the approach was refined with the addition of in-depth interviews. Axelson (2008: 235–47) charts the references between filmic narration and lives of his interviewees.
This method combines quantitative and qualitative approaches. The key concept of the interpretative horizon refers to the process of socialization and it is defined collectively and ideologically by means of a set of values. In the study Axelson (2008) employed a questionnaire for the 197 students and continued with focus group discussions, identifying three different interpretative horizons of, respectively, more, less and mixed religious socializations. The question of socialization and religious change form the framework upon which Axelson (2008: 238) rests the hypothesis of three features. The hypothesis proposes that the group of individuals with religious socialization rest their interpretations on the existential questions of religious origin and the existential interpretation of film is employed with less, or mixed, religious socialization and thus observed in the interpretation horizon. This hypothesis suggests that secular individuals replace the values and beliefs with the narratives and material products of popular culture. The semi-structured interviews and screening of personally-chosen films refines the audience study. The analytical tool examined the films’ reception, as well as existential interpretations and the implementation of the interpretation in narrative schema.

The discussion of the results suggests that the comprehension is creative and unique when it is attached to the existential interpretations and expressed in relation with inherent interpretative horizon (Axelson 2008: 246–7). The film and entertainment media are used as a cultural resource and a reflection of individual belief systems. The cultural environments are different and institutional agencies have an impact on the interpretations that allow dissimilar conclusions to be reached in US and in Sweden. The findings can be aligned with those of Lynn Schofield Clark (2003). The concept of creative interpretation indicates the seminal question of free choice and the opportunities inherent in a particular historical and cultural environment.

Finland

It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the rapid changes occurring in the media, or the importance of popular culture in shaping alternative religious and spiritual identities and forms of new religious expression. Marcus Moberg’s seminal study of Christian metal music outlines a whole subculture that is based on the intention to convey a Christian, evangelical message. The music scene is doing religion and being Christian in a particular way that comprises lifestyle, aesthetics, the festival scene and material cultural dimensions which Moberg (2009: 1–9) outlines as occupying three central dimensions. The first of these dimensions of Christian metal media includes magazines – amateur magazines, that is fanzines – internet sites, discussion forums,
On studying religion, the media and young people

and the official webpages of Christian metal bands. Secondly, the content of the Christian metal music lyrics sets them apart from the secular metal bands and foregrounds an alternative means of expressing one’s Christianity. The last dimension is that of consumption and the centrality of the associated lifestyles and visual aesthetics, which are represented in clothing and as part of live concert performances and music videos.

The interviews open up a view of the popular music scene of Christian metal music from an authoritative angle. The interviewees consist of 19 musicians and three producers or administrators of the transnational media in Swedish, Finnish and English. Along with the approach of social and identity constructions, the concept of scene is key to the study. Popular music studies employs this concept, referring to aspects of the production, consumption and experience of popular music in various forms and the specific structure of all of them. The concept of scene connotes the strong spatial and visual features of the performing arts (Moberg 2009: 34–41). The concept of identity is asserted as relational and constructive and it comprises the characteristics which define an individual in relation to others. At the same time it involves both positive and negative expressions of the self in negotiation with others. Moberg (2009: 38–9) discusses issues of freedom of choice and identity. The expressions of identity-narration or personal biographies delineate the past, present and future of an individual and thus are related to temporality and change. Being part of a group, expressions of ethos and the dimension of belonging through material acquisitions and consumption are the forms of identity constructed in the scene of Christian metal as well as in other subcultures.

The discursive analysis of of the vast material culture and the interviews identify the characteristic patterns of the Christian metal scene.

Moberg (2009: 80–4) sets out the development of social change in the 1990s in Finland, when religious uniformity opened out into a more pluralistic environment. The process of weak religious socialization among young people and the central role of popular culture as resource for spiritual and religious insight is also discussed. In this process of social and cultural diversity Moberg (2009: 106–7) shows the relationship between Christian metal scenes and Evangelical apocalyptic themes, as well as the general nature and popularity of metal rock music in general, as the reflection of an increasing uncertainty in post-industrial and secularized societies, where the consequences of change have the greatest impact on working class youth.
Why should we study young people?

The four studies presented young people as authors of their own narratives. They were studied as audience members, students, artists and teenagers in order to comprehend the processes of interaction in mediated cultural change. The main focus of the studies in question is the relationships between the media, society, religion and the individual. These relationships are intertwined with fictions, beliefs and narratives and the dimensions of manipulation. Freedom of choice has brought along with it difficulties in grasping the general socio-economical view, as Clark noted. On the one hand, media culture is dominant with the commercial character of the global marketplace with a visibility of ideologies and religions and with the drive to sell. The call for alternative and new forms of expressing spiritual and religious conviction and life styles is found in the subcultures or scenes of fandom and artistic creation, as Moberg stated, but not without the negative aspect of everyday conventions of exclusion and inclusion in the groups, which have lot in common.

The process of belonging in the mediated environment is dependent on the acquisition of skills and knowledge; mastering content and symbolic and economic resources as Mia Lövheim points out. Individuals are reaching maturity in an environment characterised by information overflow and choices that seem infinite are in fact narrow. The resources and building blocks of individuality bring up issues of authenticity and authority. The changing media environment and the required strategies to meet it need to be tested in the media-saturated environment. The understanding of the function and structure of authenticity in the creation of narratives of the self and claims as to the authority of this creation are central in the individuation process. Abby Day (2012: 42–3) refers to several studies of the relations of belief which show that young people value beliefs that are chosen freely and are experienced as and felt to be personal and meaningful. The sense or feeling of belonging is counter to the sense of individualism. In the context of relationships with parents and the family, the formation of belief is authentic and shapes the beliefs of the children. It is at the heart of our understanding that structures of meaning include the emotional dimension (see e.g. Day 2012, Riis and Woodhead 2011).

The centrality of identification, group formation and shared feelings are related to active audience studies and fandom studies. In the consumer society the symbolic system of rarity and exclusiveness has changed and the material dimension of life can be reached by almost everyone (Riis and Woodhead 2011). The basic need to belong, to share values and beliefs constructs an au-
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authentic and constructive element for identity in social interactions. The varieties and changes of the group process of identity therefore need more attention in the study of young people, media and religion. The roles of institutions in socialization and the dynamic relations of family, institutions, peer groups and media need to be approached creatively.

The art of asking the right questions is at the core of the professional skills that a doctoral student performs in the construction process of the identity of the scholar. Building new approaches and circulating old ones in order to study the relationships between popular culture and creative narratives of the individual presumes a tolerance for the prevailing climate of change in the media. Studies of religion and spirituality among young people requires understandings of groups and roles and the organisation of experience in media environment. The contemporary modes of religious socialization, particularly in media, provide new fields of meticulous inquiry in late modern society.

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ALEXANDER D. ORNELLA

Of watchdogs and safe havens

Control mechanisms and/in online sacred spaces

Introduction

‘Die große Schlacht. Der Hass des Satans auf Benedikt XVI. Non prae-
valebunt’¹ is the headline of an article the Austrian-based and Catholic news
portal, kath.net, published in early June 2012. It is about how badly and
unfairly the media treat the Catholic Church and its official representatives
in the wake of the so-called ‘Vatileaks’ scandal and it reasons that Satan is
behind the attacks of the media, society, popular culture, on saintly figures
such as Pope Benedict XVI. ‘Gegen die Diktatur des Relativismus’² is another
article published on the same platform in the context of a conference hosted
by the Catholic Heiligenkreuz monastery. On the forum kath.net, powerful
language is employed to draw the faithful in, to make them feel themselves
to be safe within a community of like-minded people in the midst of turmoil.
I argue that news portals and message boards such as kath.net create safe
spaces within a world whose culture, values, and morals are not only not un-
derstood but despised. My analysis is informed by critical discourse analysis
and based on Paul Ricœur’s understanding of narratives and how narratives
create worlds. As a first step I will discuss the concept of space and Ricœur’s
understanding of narrative identity. After an introduction to the news portal
kath.net, I will offer a close reading of some articles to show how these safe
spaces are created and guarded. To conclude, I will reflect on the implications
of the self-understanding of kath.net and some of its user base on the under-
standing of hierarchy and the role of theology in the Church.

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¹ ‘The Great Battle – Satan’s hatred towards Benedict XVI – non praevalebunt.’
Schwibach 2012. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.
² ‘Against the Dictatorship of Relativism.’ Kath.net 2012c.
Data, approach, methodology

Doing research on news portals and message boards or online forums is challenging and a good example of a larger study which involved coding practices and 100 blogs as source material is Heidi Campbell’s study of religious authority, ‘Religious authority and the blogosphere’ (Campbell 2010: 251–76). This present study is on a much smaller scale. I do not employ any quantitative methods, but offer a close reading of an article covering the US 2012 election results which is supplemented by an analysis of the coverage of an altar consecration in the Diocese of Graz-Seckau in Austria in April 2012. A similar analysis – with similar results – could be made of coverage of topics such as marriage, (homo)sexuality, or abortion, though a detailed analysis of all these issues would go beyond the scope of this article as well as constraints on its length.

For data gathering, I relied on virtual ethnography as method as outlined, for example, by Christine Hine (2008). I have been following articles and posts on the kath.net forum for at least four years as a passive and non-registered observer. I have looked at the site as-is and at what a non-registered guest gets to see/read when they visit it. As such, all the articles and postings I have looked at are publicly accessible. It is important to point out that – like many online forums or portals – kath.net reserves the right to moderate user comments on kath.net news articles.3

Besides the news portal with its commentary function, there is also a message board – kathnews.com – which often carries heated discussions. The focus of this analysis, however, is the news portal and its associated comments. Hine points out that passive data collection from online sources is not necessarily the best data collection method and that a more active approach might be beneficial for the findings (Hine 2008: 257, 261). However, since kath.net defines itself as a news portal (‘Katholische Nachrichten’) with the majority of content being the news posts, I chose to take the passive approach.

3 The terms and conditions for posting comments under each article states: ‘Für die Kommentiermöglichkeit von kath.net-Artikeln müssen Sie sich bei kathLogin registrieren. Die Kommentare werden von Moderatoren stichprobenartig überprüft und freigeschaltet. Ein Anrecht auf Freischaltung besteht nicht.’ (‘You need to be registered with kathLogin to be able to post and comment on kath.net-articles. The comments are being checked by moderators randomly and published. There is no right to have your comments published!’) See, for example, kath.net 2012d. Between the time of the writing of this article and its publication, kath.net has started to modify the commenting function and commenting is currently disabled for all articles. All discussions are currently taking place in the kath.net message board, kathnews.com.
I am aware, though, as Hine points out, that the outsider or passive observer might find a culture bizarre in its practices and experience difficulties in taking it seriously as a coherent domain of cultural practice (Hine 2008: 262). Having grown up in a traditional Catholic environment, I am familiar with the various shades of Catholic culture. Hine also points out that ‘the lurker risks assuming, without any experiential basis for doing so, that the public bulletin board is all that there is for all members. Trying out what it is like to be a participating member can be a route into a complex set of communicative practices which deploy multiple media in flexible and creative fashion’ (Hine 2008: 262). I am aware that the news portal forms only a part of the communication processes in the kath.net universe. Yet it is exactly this public appearance of the news portal and its user comments, which is accessible to all, that I am interested in and what these discourses which are open to and accessible by the internet community might tell us about the self-understanding of kath.net and its users.

The guiding question in the analysis of the material has been the question of the visual, symbolic, and linguistic representation of self, other, and world. As such, I have looked at the design of the site, the style the articles are written in and what they emphasize or leave out, as well as what language the comments employ and the dynamic between the posts as the number of comments posted rises. The analysis of the material is informed by critical discourse analysis (CDA). Teun A. van Dijk understands CDA as ‘a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality’ (van Dijk 2001: 352). Most scholars agree that CDA is neither a unified theory nor a form of methodology, but rather a critical mindset that tries to uncover ideologies, power structures, questions of gender and hierarchies in their social contexts (cf. Wodak 2002: 6). I am thus interested in the social effect of the texts and their construction and representation of ideologies (cf. Fairclough 2003: 8 f.).

To interpret the data and my findings, I draw on Paul Ricœur’s idea of narrative identity. Norman Fairclough argues that ‘texts are . . . parts of social events. One way in which people can act and interact in the course of social events is to speak or to write. It is not the only way. Some social events have a highly textual character, others don’t’ (Fairclough 2003: 21). Social events, however, always also have symbolic character and are part of a system of representation, communication, and processes through which we construct
and mediate meaning (cf. du Gay and Hall 1997: 13). However, according to Ricœur, all texts and actions need to be ‘read’ and interpreted with regards to their socio-cultural, religious, and political context in order to be understood. This paper is concerned with the production and re-production of identities and spaces. The combination of CDA and Ricœur’s framework of narrative identity allows us to uncover the identity processes which are at work on kath.net.

While this paper focuses on the Austrian platform, kath.net can be seen as part of a broader and worldwide phenomenon of increasingly traditional and conservative Catholic blogging. This particular ‘Catholic blogosphere’ consists of both lay and ordained Catholics and is becoming increasingly conservative as it attempts to enforce official Church doctrine. Recently, the Catholic theologian Tina Beattie, Professor for Catholic Studies at the University of Roehampton has been the focus of attention for her support of a re-reading of Catholic sexual-moral teaching. Examples such as blog posts commenting on Beattie’s academic research or the site kath.net show that Catholic (online) discourse is increasingly shaped by (a probably small number of) highly engaged Catholics who are very well-versed in staging their media presence.

**Theoretical framework: space/spaces/sacred spaces and the internet**

When the internet gained momentum and its use started to spread in the 1980s and 1990s, many media artists, media theorists, cultural studies scholars, techno-scientists, journalists and activists perceived it as revolutionary, as a utopian space, or at least a space which could be transformed into a utopian, non-discriminatory space, free from earthly economic, political, and power interests. In 1996, for example, John P. Barlow, the co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), a non-profit organization and advocate of personal rights in digital space, published the Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace, reflecting some of the ideals floating around of what the internet is meant to be: ‘We are creating a world that all may enter

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4 Following this attention, the University of San Diego withdrew an invitation extended to Beattie to give a public lecture. Cf. Beattie 2012, McElwee 2012.
5 Examples for blogposts are: Farrow 2012, Donnelly 2012, Archbold 2012.
6 Electronic Frontier Foundation EFF 2012.
without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth’ (Barlow 1996, cf. also Barlow 1996b).

Virtual reality was often viewed in contrast to mundane, earthly reality and existence. Virtual reality was both the ‘wholly Other’ as well as a means for self-transformation; a means by which we could transcend our very existence. These visions were infused with religious language and religious symbols, a rhetoric of deliverance and freedom. Stephen Talbott poignantly summarized the religious visions connected with the internet: ‘The Internet, many believe, will cleanse us from sin. In particular, it will deliver us from prejudice and bigotry. The idea is that I can’t see your age or race or gender or handicap when I interact with you across the Net, and therefore I can’t cultivate prejudicial feelings against you’ (Talbott 2000: 998). And he critically remarks: ‘It’s bizarre, this widespread sense of exhilaration about freedom from prejudice. Think about it: we are supposed to triumph over the urge to mistreat each other – how? By not seeing each other! By making distant abstractions of each other. The idea seems to be that we can be more fully human toward each other by being less human, less there, less in view’ (Talbott 2000: 199).

As time went by, network-based communication technologies pervaded everyday lives and the distinction between ‘real’ reality and ‘virtual’ reality, between online/offline became increasingly blurry and messy. The omnipresence of communication technologies today, in particular in the Western world,9 and the ready availability of the internet through mobile devices, have created an atmosphere in which many users take its possibilities for granted. Being able to log on has become something almost like a basic need, bringing

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7 This difference between ‘here’ and ‘there’, the earthly domain and the domain of the cyberspace is also reflected in the Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace: ‘We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather. We have no elected government, nor are we likely to have one, so I address you with no greater authority than that with which liberty itself always speaks. I declare the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies you seek to impose on us. You have no moral right to rule us nor do you possess any methods of enforcement we have true reason to fear.’ Barlow 1996a.

8 Page numbers in Talbott 2000 references refer to the printed German translation, English original available in the PDF version of the book.

9 Modern communication technologies have become an integral part of the way we ‘do’ things, but the ‘digital divide’, not only between Western and developing countries, but also within Western countries is often overlooked.
with it the pressure for many to actually be available by means of ICT 24/7. To counter the stress this is causing for some, Volkswagen was reported to have stopped delivering emails to mobile devices outside of working hours (BBC 2011). As such, in the West the internet has lost much of its early promise of being a utopian and democratizing power, as the German media theorist Norbert Bolz has pointed out (cf. lecture: Bolz 2009). At the same time we witness a phenomenon where many young people are immersed in computer-mediated communication and social media but are, at the same time, very computer illiterate.

For the purpose of this paper, it is important to keep the initial excitement about the internet and the subsequent disenchantment in mind because I argue that this dis-enchantment is not a complete one, or in other words, the disenchantment has left room for re-enchantment. On the internet, spaces and places have emerged which users experience as special, wholly other; as sacred in their own right (cf. Helland 2007, Jacobs 2007). The perception of a website or an online space as sacred/special, however, is not limited to online churches, temples, or online rituals; the notion of the ‘sacred’ can be applied to websites or online spaces which are experienced as ‘other’, as space in which the profane is transcended, a space which is marked as ‘other’, experienced as such, and which offers the possibility of encountering something ‘other’. And it is this construction and perception of internet spaces, of community spaces as forms of sacred space which I am concerned with in this paper.

**Wholly other spaces**

As human beings, we are always already social and communicative beings and communication is a vital part of our *conditio humana*. In fact, we exist to communicate, not just through language and words or bodily gestures, but our sheer existence is grounded in, emerges from, and *is* communication. We are part of, participate in, and contribute to communicative practices in a variety of ways. As communicative beings we never exist in isolation, but are at the very heart relational.

The notion of human beings as communicative and relational finds expression in Paul Ricoeur’s understanding of narrative identity. He argues that we each contribute to our narratives, to the narrative of our lives; we are agents in this narrative, but never the sole authors. Rather, we are agents and co-authors, because the beginning and end of the narrative of our lives, births and deaths are written and told by others; they are part of someone else’s nar-
rative rather than our own (cf. Ricœur 1995: 160–2). ‘By narrating a life of which I am not the author as to its existence, I make myself its coauthor as to its meaning’ (Ricœur 1995: 162).

The understanding of our beginning and end as (other people’s) narratives which are – ultimately – withdrawn from our grasp expresses very well the notion that we are always already related to one another through communicative practices. Narratives tie people together and bring people into relationship; they can foster a sense of community and value within that community. Narratives are particularly important for religious communities, as Paul Ricœur stresses: ‘[t]o be a religious subject is to agree to enter or to have already entered into this vast circuit involving a founding word, mediating texts, and traditions of interpretations’ (Ricœur 1998: 145). And with the term ‘vast circuit’, he means ‘hermeneutic “circles”: I know this word because it is written, this writing because it is received and read; and this reading is accepted by a community, which, as a result, agrees to be deciphered by its founding texts; and it is this community that reads them’ (Ricœur 1998: 145).

But narratives are always also more than a mere web or network which brings people together, or helps to form a community. Narratives, in particular our life narratives, consist of written and spoken words, language, actions, and practices. Language as well as human action and human communicative practices, however, are highly symbolic practices which need to be ‘read’, interpreted, and understood, based on their socio-cultural and historic contexts.

Drawing on Ricœur’s understanding of narrative identity, we can think of computer-mediated communication practices as ‘texts’ which can be interpreted, which have a social dimension, and which leave their marks on history (cf. Ricœur 1971). These texts, text fragments, and communicative practices in all their variety and range of genres, then, understood as narratives and narrative fragments, both allow for worlds to emerge and can be used to create and construct worlds; worlds which users, readers, recipients are confronted with, contribute to, have to interpret and make sense of. As such, narratives also frame the users’ or readers’ perceptions of the world, they ‘teach’ them to view and understand the world in a certain way (cf. Ricœur 2005: 200). We rely on narratives to ‘invent’ fictional worlds, but also to invent our very own world. At the same time, we use narratives to ‘discover’, explore, explain, and frame the world we live in (Ricœur 1979: 120). And these

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10 In the context of the cinema, Brent Plate makes a similar argument that films create and re-create worlds, cf. Plate 2008.
narratives we create, we find ourselves immersed in, and expose ourselves to ‘change reality’. This process of invention and discovery through narratives, what we do with narratives, how we frame narratives, and what these frames do with and to us can be understood as a process of a ‘redescription of reality’ (Ricœur 1979: 123–41, 127).

Most of what Ricœur says about narratives is based on his understanding of fiction. For him, in particular the genre of fiction offers – and he understands this in a very positive way – a laboratory of meaning in which we can experiment with different worlds, different behaviours, contexts, values, and moral frameworks (cf. Ricœur 1995: 115, 140, 148, 156–64). Yet, what Ricœur says about fiction in particular can be applied to the possibilities narratives in general can offer as well as to the narrative fragments we find on the internet or on online message boards.

Computer-mediated communication is not just a way of exchanging messages but is also a powerful way to create narratives. As Peggy Nelson’s artwork shows, short messages such as 160-characters-long twitter messages can be used to create (narrative) worlds. Using twitter, Nelson has created two distinct characters, each with their stories; not a narrative in a traditional sense, but a narrative nonetheless, as Nelson herself argues: ‘I do new media art with a focus on decentralized, episodic storytelling. . . . So they’re [her projects] all stories told in little bits at a time, with a lot of gaps’ (Pitzer 2010). These examples show that new media, message boards, short messages, can, in fact, contribute to this construction of the world, the changing, rewriting, and re-description of reality. As such, they can create and offer a framework through which we experience and interpret whatever phenomena we encounter.

Narratives are a way to structure life, they offer a symbolic system or a symbolic structure that helps interpret our experiences, conflicts, or our encounters with the world. Ricœur argues that such symbolic systems are vital to social life:

Unless social life has a symbolic structure, there is no way to understand how we live, do things, and project these activities in ideas, no way to understand how reality can become an idea or how real life can produce illusions. This symbolic structure can be perverted, precisely by class interests and so on as Marx has shown, but if there were not a symbolic function already at work in the most primitive kind of action, I could not understand, for my part, how reality could produce shadows of this kind. This is why I am seeking a function of ideology more radical than the distorting, dissimulating function. The distorting function covers only a small
surface of the social imagination, in just the same way that hallucinations or illusions constitute only a part of our imaginative activity in general (Ricœur 1986: 8).

We can use the idea of narrative as creating worlds and spaces in the analysis of the dynamics of online religion news portals and religion message boards. Narratives – not only fictions, but narratives in general – write and re-write our world and as such contribute to a social imagination which ‘is constitutive of social reality’ (Ricœur 1986: 3). This ‘social imagination’ or ‘cultural imagination’, according to Ricœur, operates ‘in both constructive and de-structive ways, as both confirmation and contestation of the present situation’ (Ricœur 1986: 3). People contributing articles to religious news portals, or posts in the comment section or on message boards, then, construct and deconstruct the world using narrative fragments. They deconstruct the world as they perceive it to be and (re)construct a world as it ought to be. This re-written and re-described world is within this world and yet apart from it. It is an ideal, a utopian world, because many believers participating in online communication long for its realization eagerly.

Typically, an ideal world, a utopian world, is a world that portrays a social state that is not realized yet but anticipated. However, its non-realization or its virtual state does not make it less real (cf. Gehmann 2012: 7–9). It is very real for many of its participants and its ideal/utopian make-up ‘bleed[s]’ into the real world (Geraci 2010: 72). These virtual worlds, or narratives, created online do not only frame the perception of the offline world; they have real world consequences.11 As scholars such as Christian Stegbauer point out, the internet does not suspend social structures or hierarchies, but can produce and reproduce them online. Rather than being an anarchy, the internet maps offline hierarchies, prejudices, or creates new hierarchies (Stegbauer 2012a and 2012b). In turn, the internet also re-writes and transforms offline social structures, contributing to how these structures are perceived and interpreted. Online and offline, then – and I am wary of using these terms in this way because I do not want to suggest that online and offline are two entirely separate spheres – are not only in a mutual relationship, shaping each other and imprinting their characteristics and structures onto each other, but both are part of ‘our reality’ and our attempts to make sense of the world.

11 Cf. the blogging activites on Tina Beattie mentioned at the beginning of this article.
Kath.net

According to the imprint on its website, kath.net is an independent, Catholic, Austrian, internet-based magazine/news portal which aims to report on what is going on in the Catholic world, in particular in the German-speaking countries. According to the website kathpedia.com, a Catholic online encyclopedia based on Wikipedia software, kath.net is an ‘unabhängige, katholische Nachrichtenagentur im Internet, die seit Herbst 2001 existiert und zu den wichtigsten Internetseiten im deutschen Sprachraum gehört’ (Kathpedia.com 2012a).12

Kathpedia.com’s evaluation of kath.net as one of the most important websites in the German-speaking area is more a self-evaluation, however, because both kath.net and kathpedia.com are operated by the registered society ‘kath.net’, based in Linz/Austria. The website kath.net was founded in 2001, is run by lay Catholics and runs on a not-for-profit basis. It is mostly financed by donations from its readers, a yearly payment by the Austrian branch of the Pontifical Foundation ‘Aid to the Church in Need’, advertising, and the selling of books and readers’ tours (Kathpedia.com 2012a).

One of the founders and main contributors to the site is Roland Noé, nicknamed ‘Gandalf’ in the kath.net universe. He and his team are part of what I perceive to be an interesting phenomenon of religious conservatism among young people. The European religious landscape has dramatically changed in the last few decades. While radical secularization theories predicting the end of religion have been proven wrong and religion in a variety of forms and contexts is more present than ever in Western Europe, institutionalized religious communities do, indeed, struggle and face a steady decline in numbers. However, we can witness what seems to be a growing number (or at least one which is increasingly visible in the public sphere) of young, dynamic, and tech-savvy Catholics for whom the Pope is a hero. Most of them are committed to the teachings of the Catholic Church in all its aspects and are organizing themselves with the help of the internet to attempt to spread their enthusiasm out into the world with the help of communication technologies. Another example for this highly dynamic and active scene is the recent Catholic radio project ‘Fisherman.fm’ in Switzerland.13

12 An ‘independent, Catholic online news agency which exists since fall 2001 and which belongs to one of the most important websites in the German-speaking area.’

13 Another example of what I perceive to be an increasingly active and engaged, conservative Catholic movement is ‘Catholic Called to Witness (CC2W)’ a Catholic faith-based organization based in the USA. It gained attention because of a TV short
Connected to kath.net is a Catholic version of YouTube, ‘kathtube.com’, as well as the aforementioned Catholic version of Wikipedia, ‘Kathpedia.com’. Another branch of kath.net, kathhost.net, offers free web space to Catholic projects under the condition that the contents of the website are in accordance with the teachings and the catechism of the Catholic Church (Kathhost 2012, also Kathpedia.com 2012b). The editor of kath.net, Roland Noé also operates the twitter account @KatholikenNet, which had 656 followers at the beginning of November 2012 (Twitter@KatholikenNet 2012).

It is difficult, however, to say anything about the size of the kath.net community. Kath.net itself states that in the period 2009–10 (and these are the most recent figures published on kathpedia), they had an average of 300,000–400,000 unique visitors (that is unique IP addresses) and around 30,000 visitors per day (Kathpedia.com 2012c). These numbers, however, do not tell us anything about how many people really visited the site, who those people are, how long they stayed on the site, how much they read or how engaged they were, or what brought them to kath.net.

Kath.net is a private initiative and when one contacts Catholic Church officials for a comment on it, they are quick to point this out. For the purpose of this article I have contacted Austrian Church officials and those who replied either referred me to someone else, or only offered a very brief statement emphasizing the private nature of kath.net. One reply pointed out that individual bishops sympathize with the platform and that there seems to be the perception that kath.net has become more moderate in the past few years (email conversations in April–June 2012). Despite its private nature and not being connected to any diocese, the website ‘kath.net: Catholic News’ strives to imbue itself with an official character by means of both language and visual style. The iconography used (the logos and images) as well as the terminology ('Catholic news,' 'from the Catholic world') makes the visitor at least wonder what the exact nature of the relationship between kath.net and the Church hierarchy is and whether or not the site might be an official outlet. At the very least, kath.net attempts to create an aura of legitimacy and to establish itself within the ecclesiastic hierarchy. This is supported by an entry on kath.net – on Kathpedia.com – where the operators confirm that their platform is

piece entitled ‘Test of Fire’ which it produced (through Creative Lab LLC) for the US elections, calling on US Catholics to vote for the candidate who supports a traditional understanding of marriage and is anti-abortion. The video can be viewed on the CC2W website.
not an official medium of the Catholic Church. They stress, however, that 'the Vatican, many bishops, priests, and practitioners appreciate kath.net because of its independence and its coverage, which is closely tied to the teachings of the Catholic Church' (Kathpedia.com 2012a). The operators then go on to cite cardinals and bishops from the German-speaking area who highlight the important contribution that kath.net is making to Catholic life and pride themselves that the official homepage of the Pontifical Council for Social Communication lists kath.net as a Catholic medium. Most importantly, kath.net takes pride in statements by Pope Benedict XVI himself, appreciating kath.net's contribution to Catholic life:

You provide humanity with important news.
I'm glad kath.net exists and that kath.net reports on what's going on in the Catholic Church.
kath.net – great work (Kathpedia.com 2012c).

Kath.net, however, is not without critics from within the hierarchy, among theologians and the broader society (at least among those who are aware of its existence). The official communication channels of various dioceses criticize kath.net and every so often, many theologians are critical in particular of kath.net's understanding of what the relationship between the Church and theology should be, and watchdogs have developed which observe and comment on kath.net's posting endeavours, for example the blog episodenfisch.blogspot.de (Saß 2012a). These few examples show that the evaluation of kath.net with-

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14 ‘KATH.NET ist – ähnlich wie Radio Maria Österreich oder Radio Horeb oder K-TV kein offizielles Medium der katholische Kirche, wird aber beim Vatikan, vielen Bischöfe, Priestern und Gläubigen aufgrund der unabhängigen aber dem kirchlichen Lehramt verbundenen Berichterstattung sehr geschätzt.’
16 Cf. for example the article in the church magazine of the Linz/Austria Diocese: Kirchenzeitung 2009.
17 A good example is the debate on kath.net which followed the so-called 'Memorandum Freiheit 2011', a petition signed by 240 professors of theology from the German-speaking area emphasizing the need for reform in the Catholic Church. Following the publication of the Memorandum, kath.net published several articles, among others an interview with Peter Seewald who published several works on Pope Benedict XVI addressing the Memorandum. In the comments section of this and other articles it becomes quite clear what is expected of theology: to give readings of and teach the catechism rather than critically reflect, challenge, and re-read traditions. Cf. kath.net 2011b.
in the German-speaking, Catholic world remains ambivalent; some welcome and support it while others are critical of it.

Kath.net is making use of the ambivalence which characterizes both its own perception and the range of approaches to understanding and doing Catholic theology to legitimize what it is doing and to stage and locate itself within the heart of the Catholic Church; one could even say within the ecclesiastic hierarchy. It does so by referring to bishops and the value for and contribution to Catholic life they see kath.net as having/making, by emphasizing their opportunities for exclusive interviews with representatives of the official Church hierarchy, such as the Vatican’s press secretary P. Federico Lombardi (cf. Suvada 2007), or a quote from Cologne’s Joachim Cardinal Meisner when asking for donations during Lent in 2011: ‘KATH.NET leistet “einen wichtigen Beitrag zur Meinungsbildung” und ist ein “unverzichtbares Informationsmedium”, schrieb uns Kardinal Joachim Meisner (Köln)” (kath.net 2011a).18 As such, while kath.net is a private initiative, it is always more than just that; it is also an attempt to weave and write itself into the web of ecclesiastic narratives, thus creating a space that transcends ordinary or profane spaces. Sacred space is always something that is different and other from profane space. In the case of kath.net, this process of ‘othering’ a space happens on at least two levels: that of Church authority (who may or may not know what exactly they are legitimizing) and the way kath.net is using and staging itself, incorporating official comments into its narrative of self-understanding. With its good relations to benevolent bishops, by criticizing bishops, parish priests, or theologians who are not 100 per cent in line with official Church doctrine as laid out and interpreted by the Vatican, it tries to put mechanisms in place in order to project the online, utopian, safe and sacred space onto the Catholic Church without understanding that Catholicity always also means diversity, plurality, and a permanent re-negotiation of traditions.

**Examples and a detailed analysis**

Kath.net reports on a range of events or topics relevant to Catholic life and the abundance of material makes the tracking, categorizing, and analysis of the material a tedious and time-consuming task. Philip Saß, a German studies student, has been following and categorizing kath.net articles and user com-

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18 ‘KATH.NET makes “an important contribution to the formation of opinion” and is a “indispensable information medium” Joachim Cardinal Meisner (Cologne) wrote us.’
Of watchdogs and safe havens

ments since July 2010 and currently uses 39 categories dedicated to topics or individuals, ranging from abortion to Islam, homosexuality, right-wing ideas, and what he calls ‘Wirres’ (rants), to group articles and user comments (Saß 2012b). While not necessarily an academic categorization, with its particular focus on user comments, it nonetheless gives the reader an idea of the variety of topics that are being covered, as well as the discussion style of the website. It would be a worthwhile endeavour to properly categorize, tag, and code articles and user comments, as well as forum posts in the kath.net forum, but this is beyond the scope of the present study. It is also important to point out that not all users join in the often very harsh and polemical discussion style, in particular when it comes to the hot issues.

For the close reading and analysis, I have chosen the kath.net article ‘Der “Christ” Obama und die Heuchelei des Westens’ (kath.net 2012b) on the US 2012 election results because of its timely relevance. This detailed analysis will be supplemented by a brief overview of the discussion on the nature of the ‘proper’ relationship between religion, culture, and the arts.

2012 US Elections

For the close reading and analysis I have chosen the coverage by kath.net of the results of the 2012 US presidential elections and the comments to the kath.net articles. User comments can be rated by other logged-in users using a simple ‘up’ or ‘down’ choice. No details are given as to how many users, or who, gave the post a positive or negative rating; the results of the rating are merely represented using a colour code ranging from dark red (negative) to bright green (positive). More analysis using coding and tagging strategies would be needed to decipher the exact process of which comments get which ratings and why. For obvious reasons – that is to say, the fact that the site has a Catholic background – posts in line with Catholic doctrine generally receive high ratings, whereas others generally receive low ratings. There are, however, the odd posts, both supportive and critical of Catholic doctrine or kath.net’s agenda, which receive mixed or unexpected ratings.

Kath.net makes it clear that it does not approve of the results of the presidential elections, or the characterization of Barack Obama as a Christian. The headline of an 8 Nov 2012 article states: ‘Obama, the “Christian”, and the hypocrisy of the West’ (kath.net 2012b). The opening paragraph states that the majority of faithful Catholics did not vote for Obama and the less frequently attended church services, the more likely they were to be pro-Obama. While
initial exit polls, indeed, suggested that Catholics who attend service at least once a week preferred Romney over Obama (Obama: 42%, Romney: 57%; cf. MSNBC 2012), the message of the headline and the first paragraph is clear and seems carefully constructed. Obama is not a Christian, but a ‘Christian’ (notice the quotes), and faithful Catholics (in contrast to people who self-identify as Catholics but do not go to church regularly) predominantly backed Romney. The use of the quotation marks in the headline clearly suggests that the editors do not think of Obama as a faithful or proper Christian, most probably because of his stance on issues like abortion and marriage equality. The headline, together with the first paragraph, then, sets the tone and the agenda for the entire article, suggesting that if someone considers themselves to be a proper Christian/Catholic (without quotes), they simply cannot vote for Barack Obama. No matter what Obama’s stance on social issues might be, he has violated what are often termed the non-negotiable issues, including issues such as abortion, marriage equality, stem cell research, and, often, religious freedom.

Obama might or might not be a believer according to a ‘traditional’ understanding, but it is interesting that only some criteria, for example the non-negotiables, and not others, for example social issues, are being employed by some faithful to classify someone as religious or not. To back up the article’s claim on Obama’s religiosity – or lack thereof – further on in the article the author states that ‘the Catholic Church’ was not overly excited about Obama’s re-election either. Rather than considering if there are opposing views (by opposing I mean Catholic representatives or members of the official Church who leaned towards the Democrats), the choice of words ‘the Catholic Church’ paints a picture of it as a unanimous bloc. This not only poses a question about the understanding of the Church and the role of the relationship between its members, i.e. the hierarchy and lay people, but it silences critical voices within the hierarchy itself.20 To support the argument, the article then quotes Timothy Cardinal Dolan, president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), stating that the Catholic Church will continue to fight for the sanctity of life, marriage, and religious freedom. The terminology used in the article also makes it clear that kath.net does not think much of media reports that aim to depict Obama as having any kind of spiritual life.

The user comments on the article continue the article’s construction process of the narrative of what a proper Christian is supposed to be. One user, tünnes, states that a ‘faithful Christian’ (notice again the quotes) who never

20 Cf. for example the statement by Jesuit Fr. John D. Whitney in Morris-Young 2012.
attends services is already caught in the devil’s clutches and lists Obama as a ‘prominent’ example (tünnes 2012).\textsuperscript{21} For his comment, he received not the highest, but a very high user rating. Other users express their dismay at the election result, referring to the number of unborn lives the election results may cost. In their discussion of abortion and the election of Obama, some users alluded to Hitler and his brutal killing of millions of Jews and received the highest rating for their comments. Some of these posts, such as that by a certain Dismas, rely on the use of double exclamation and question marks; ‘!!’ and ‘??’. The use of quotation marks in Dismas’ post is interesting. In his last sentence, he/she points out that neither Obama nor Romney are Christians, but uses quotation marks when talking about Obama: ‘Barack Hussein Obama ist kein “Christ” ebenso wie der Mormone Romney kein Christ ist. Oh Heilige Jungfrau bitte für uns!!’ (Dismas 2012).\textsuperscript{22} Interestingly, another user, MatMatt, who points out that he/she does not think that Obama is a faithful Christian but that his faith is rather just a role he is playing received a very low user rating for his post: ‘Ich glaube auch nicht, das Obama ein gläubiger Christ ist. Er mußte und muß weiterhin diese Rolle spielen, um in den amerikanischen Medien bestehen zu können. Im Übrigen paßt das auch nicht zu seiner lockerer und sympathischer Art. . . ’ (MatMatt 2012).\textsuperscript{23} While this is a rather critical post addressing the questions whether or not one has to be – or appear to be – religious in order to win elections, the highly rated response by bücherwurm to MatMatt’s post shows why the post received a very negative rating. People seemed to have interpreted the post such that they thought that it implied that having a casual/friendly attitude and being Christian do not go together (cf. bücherwurm 2012). In his reply, MatMatt clarified that politicians should stay out of religion altogether, and receives yet again a very low user rating (MatMatt 2012). Obviously, kath.net users do not agree with the opinion that politicians should stay out of religion.

A post saying ‘I congratulate all those Catholics who once again opted in favour of legalized child murder’ (pro papa 2012)\textsuperscript{24} only received an average

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{21} ‘Ein „gläubiger Christ“ der nie in die Kirche geht, mag sich noch für einen solchen halten, aber in Wirklichkeit ist er schon lange in den Fängen des Widersachers. Prominentes Beispiel: Obama.’
\textsuperscript{22} ‘Barack Hussein Obama is not a “Christian” and the Mormon Romney is not a Christian either. Holy Mary, pray for us!!’
\textsuperscript{23} ‘I, too, do not believe that Obama is a faithful Christian. He had and will continue having to play this role to survive in the media. Further, it doesn’t match his casual and friendly attitude. . . ’
\textsuperscript{24} ‘Glückwunsch an alle Katholiken die sich wieder einmal für den legalisierten Kindermord entschieden haben.’
\end{footnotesize}
user rating which is surprising given the background and opinions held by the portal operators and many of the portal users. Overall – looking at the comments themselves and the coloured user ratings – there is a very positive attitude towards the Catholic Paul Ryan and George P. G. Bush, the Catholic nephew of former president George W. Bush.

Interestingly, many of the user comments which were critical of Mormonism received a low user rating. This might be a reflection of a broader and global transformation process in the religious landscape. In his analysis of the ways the US American religious landscape has changed in the past few decades, Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell point out that the lines of division have shifted from being based on denominational boundaries to the degree of religiousness: ‘By the 2000s, how religious a person is has become more important as a political dividing line than which denomination he or she belonged to. Church-attending evangelicals and Catholics (and other religious groups too) have found common political cause. Voters who are not religious have also found common cause with one another, but at the opposite end of the political spectrum’ (Putnam and Campbell 2012: 2).

Given its conservative and traditional agenda and often populist methods, one might think that kath.net and kath.net users would have a positive attitude towards the populist Tea Party movement. But the contrary seems to be the case. Several kath.net users are quite critical of the Tea Party movement, understanding it to be more of a problem for the Republican Party than anything and generally they receive good ratings for their criticism of the Tea Party, in particular when the Tea Party movement is used as an explanation as to why Romney lost the election.25

Quite a number of users also expressed their discontent that the 2012 elections really were about choosing the lesser of two evils and high hopes were voiced regarding Paul Ryan as potential candidate for the 2016 elections (Gandalf 2012).

25 User Adson_von_Melk (2012), for example, writes ‘Not Obama's or the Democrats’ strengths have decided these elections, but the wretched state of the Republicans. This wretched state has a name or a focal point: the Tea Party’ (‘Nicht eine Stärke Obamas oder der Demokraten hat diese Wahl entschieden, sondern das Elend der Republikaner. Dieses Elend hat einen Namen bzw. einen Brennpunkt: Tea Party’), receiving a bright green rating for his post. Placeat tibi (2012) also receives a bright green rating but states ‘I wanted to defend the Tea Party a little bit because the picture media over here [Europe] portrayal of the Tea Party is not accurate in many respects’ (‘Wollte nur die “Tea Party” ein wenig in Schutz nehmen, die eben in vielem nicht der Karikatur entspricht, wie sie von hiesigen Medien oft gemalt wird’). Roland Noé (rn) 2012.
While the German/Austrian religious landscape is different from that of the US, kath.net's discourse is driven by a very ambitious conservative Catholic group which is not afraid publicly to speak, fight, and stand up for their beliefs and values and which encourages its readers to contact both public and Church officials in matters of Church doctrine, Church discipline, and public policy.

*The consecration of a new altar*

The construction of a contrast between religion and today's culture becomes particularly obvious in the community's engagement with modern art. On 10 April 2012, the auxiliary bishop of the Austrian Graz-Seckau Diocese, Franz Lackner, consecrated an altar in the Welsche Kirche in Graz (Kath. Kirche Steiermark 2012). The design of the altar was inspired by the *sigma* or *agape* tables found in early Christian communities (cf. Sanders 2005). Kath.net reported on the consecration and expressed its disdain, not only with regard to the artwork, but also to the consecrated altar itself. The short article consists mostly of quotes of ‘faithful Catholics’ (without quotation marks this time, i.e. proper faithful Catholics) who remain unnamed and one could argue that kath.net is objectively reporting on what (some of) the faithful think of the altar. Yet, the deliberate use of quotes throughout the article makes kath.net’s own stance quite clear: kath.net and the kath.net community does not endorse the new altar and does not perceive it to be a work of art. The headline of the article is a quote saying that the altar reminds the faithful more of the console in the engine room of the Starship Enterprise, rather than an altar fit for the celebration of the Eucharist: ‘Erinnert eher an den Kontrolltisch im Maschinenraum der Enterprise’ (kath.net 2012a). In the comments section, one user compared the newly consecrated altar with an Ikea table and asks: ‘Wer kann denn da Abhilfe schaffen? Man kann doch nicht für jeden Unsinn gleich Rom einschalten?!’ (Dottrina 2012). The reference to Rome here expresses the user’s desire for more control over bishops and dioceses.

Other users voice their criticism of the reform of the liturgy by the Second Vatican Council (cf. e.g. JohannBaptist 2012) or the concept of a people’s altar in general (cf. Tina 13, 2012). One user in particular employed strong and highly symbolic language to describe his/her emotions, saying that he/she would love nothing better than to storm the church and destroy this ‘thing’

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26 ‘Reminds one rather of the console in the Enterprise’s engine room.’
27 ‘Who can help here? One cannot immediately bring Rome in to deal with every idiocy??’
ALEXANDER D. ORNELLA

in a holy rage (HL. Hilarius 2012). Similarly, another user calls on fellow Catholics to fight against the spread of what is perceived as sacrilegious art (cf. Catolica 2012, waldi 2012). The language employed here, of the 'fight', fits into the perception of a world increasingly hostile to religion where believers not only have to stand up for their values, but raise their voices and do battle. Interestingly, one user expressed his/her hope that modern art such as this new altar would pave the way for a return to the use of the high altar rather than the people’s altar (cf. Callixtus 2012). A number of users, however, expressed an appreciation of modern art such as this in church buildings, but by means of the colour-rating, the kath.net community made it clear that there is no space for such an appreciation and engagement with modern art – at least not this kind of modern art (cf. myschkin 2012).

Art wants to unsettle, challenge, provoke, question. In the context of religion and faith practices, art can be the barb of alterity which prompts the faithful to reflect critically on his/her own faith and thus come to a deeper understanding of the mysteries of faith and human life (cf. Larcher 2005). Art is, should, and wants to be subject to debate and it is through this very debate that art can open up a space in which the o/Other can be experienced. With the dismissal of the newly consecrated art and the bridge it tries to construct between early Christianity and Christianity today, kath.net tries to safeguard what it perceives to be the mysteries of faith. In reality, however, kath.net and its community deprives itself of a fruitful space which can lead the user to a better understanding, both of self as well as modern culture, which is often seen as alien or hostile.

Implications: safe spaces and conclusion

The kath.net website is not a mere news portal, or simply a website dedicated to news and discussions from the Catholic world. The way the website is presented, the articles written, the terminology used, what is reported on or what is left out, and the user comments, create an online safe haven with implications for offline structures and practices.28

28 I want to point out that some users who contribute to the kath.net debates are not Catholic or religious. As long as these users are respectful to the Church’s teaching, as well as to the religious users, they are usually tolerated or appreciated as message board contributors.
Safe havens

The operators and users of kath.net create a narrative space designed according to their own preferences. Through the way the narratives are constructed, the viewpoints that are expressed, and various control strategies, such as censorship, deletion of posts and articles, or the coloured rating system for user comments, boundaries are established. Operators, moderators, and ‘ordinary’ users contribute to safeguarding these boundaries: operators and moderators do so by means of the ability to modify posts, and users through their ability to voice their opinions and deploy different visual cues, such as the red-to-green lantern system in the comment section, or the ability to choose an avatar picture that locates and roots them in a specific religious understanding. Doing so, these various narrative fragments combine to create a safe haven: a space that is in the world and emerges out of the world, but is not of the world – to draw on Biblical language. Kath.net, then, is effectively constructed as a space in which its followers can be reassured of and reassure themselves of two things: that this virtual space is a space – maybe one of the last spaces – in which they can exert control amidst a socio-cultural climate that is perceived to be increasingly hostile, not necessarily towards all religion (kath.net people might be inclined to argue so, though they see a difference in society’s attitude towards Islam and Christianity) but particularly towards Christianity and people who try to stand up against the evil of relativism.

In a way, the kath.net universe, then, can be understood as an endeavour to extend and appropriate an important aspect of the Church’s self-understanding: that the gates of hell will not overpower it. Drawing on Church teachings and Papal authority itself, the kath.net universe becomes a mission: to gather the last few remaining righteous and faithful and provide a sanctuary, a safe haven for them.

Closely connected with this self-understanding is the perception that not all is well with the world. It is a world that is perceived of and portrayed as straying off the path God has in mind for his creation. Articles and comments on kath.net repeatedly foster this notion by referring to typically hot issues, such as the ordination of women, or more generally the debate on what the role of women in the Church should or ought to be, celibacy, homosexuality, or complete obedience to the ecclesial hierarchy and Church doctrine.

29 It would probably be worthwhile just to analyze the avatar images which are used in relation to the views of the users. Roland Noé, aka Gandalf, one of the founders of the portal, for example, uses an image of Gandalf the White from the Lord of the Rings narrative, which is shaped by Catholic ideas and symbols.
Watchdogs

The purpose of the watchdog mentality which both kath.net itself and many users exhibit, is not only to safeguard the boundaries of the online space as space of retreat, but they extend their actions to the ‘real’ or material world as well. Drawing on Ricoeur, we can argue that socio-cultural experiences are voiced and interpreted through one’s religious framework, relying on templates found in one’s religious tradition. These expressions – understood as narrative fragments – then, contribute to what makes up kath.net. In turn, kath.net becomes a new template ‘for the organization of social and psychological processes’ (Ricoeur 1986: 12). As such, we can identify a mutual relationship between kath.net as safe haven and the socio-cultural and religious world it ultimately is a part of. As a safe haven, kath.net is an ideal world, a utopian world that frames the way some of its users perceive the all-too-earthly doings of their fellow human beings. By pointing a finger at the evils of this world they are implying a model of the way the world is supposed to be – a world that does not exist but could and should exist, a world that is almost within reach because it can be so neatly constructed and created through narratives, a world that through narratives becomes very real, but is not yet achieved. To actively work towards the fulfillment of this utopia, the kath.net authors regularly call upon their readers to get in touch with bishops or politicians to lobby for their cause. To analyze how successful they are, who acts on the calls for action, and what impact or influence they actually have on religious life and on what level would need further research. However, the fact that the Graz-Seckau Diocese issued a press release, signed by the Episcopal Vicar Heinrich Schnuderl, explaining the reasoning for supporting the artwork shows that the Church hierarchy is at least aware of communities such as kath.net (Diözese Graz-Seckau 2012). Drawing on Thomas More, Paul Ricoeur argues that a ‘utopia’ is a ‘place which exists in no real place; it is a ghost city; a river with no water; a prince with no people, and so on. What must be emphasized is the benefit of this special extraterritoriality. From this “no place” an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks strange, nothing more being taken for granted. The field of the possible is now open beyond that of the actual; it is a field, therefore, for alternative ways of living’ (Ricœur 1986: 16). And he goes on to argue: ‘[i]s not utopia – this leap outside – the way in which we radically rethink what is family, what is consumption, what is authority, what is religion, and so on? Does not the fantasy of an alternative society and its exteriorization “nowhere” work as one of the most formidable contestations of what is?’ (Ricœur 1986: 116). And contesting ‘what is’, the perilous pleasures of earthly doings, is what kath.net aims to do.
Of watchdogs and safe havens

While parts of the Catholic hierarchy welcome and endorse the activities of kath.net, I argue that sites such as kath.net or the Catholic Answers Forum (2012) are part of a highly problematic phenomenon within the Catholic community. While one certainly should appreciate the involvement with and engagement in the Church of many of the kath.net users, the language employed and the intolerance towards what they perceive to be ‘dissenting’ opinions rather than crucial theological debates expresses an ahistorical, acultural, and ungrounded – or better: unearthed – understanding of both the Church and faith itself. These tendencies and phenomena are problematic both for the Catholic Church and from a theological perspective, because the watchdog mentality in effect establishes (or tries to establish) a parallel hierarchy that bypasses not only local hierarchies but also the local church. Whether or not kath.net practitioners grant authority, authenticity or credibility to the local church and its representatives, the parish priest and the local bishops depend on whether or not the local church’s theology fits into kath.net’s theology proper. The argument made is that priests and bishops owe obedience to the Pope and thus have to be in line with whatever is issued by Vatican authorities – according to the motto Roma locuta, causa finita. In this context, some posts also critically challenge local parish priests and local bishops who expect their flock to pay obeisance to them, but who themselves do not pay obeisance to their higher authority, namely the Pope. Recently, kath.net published a book called Liebesbriefe an die Kirche (Love Letters to the Church) (Knapp-Biermeier and Noé 2011) in which we find a short essay on the mission of kath.net by Armin Schwibach, a member of the editorial team and a correspondent for kath.net in Rome. In this essay, he states that kath.net’s work is shaped by the overall notion of ‘ubi Petrus, ibi Ecclesia, ibi Deus’ (Schwibach 2011). The focus is on the universal church and the Pope without mentioning the local church whatsoever. ‘Wesentlich ist der Blick auf Rom: Das Lehramt der Päpste, das Wirken des Papstes und seine konkrete Gegenwart in der Weltkirche sind Leitstern der Arbeit von KATH.NET. Dazu gehört: Für einen Katholiken [sic!] ist es nicht möglich, das, was er [sic!]}

30 In some posts, users of the Catholic Answers Forum give what I perceive to be highly problematic, if not harmful, advice. One user asks if he/she can stay with his/her cohabiting daughter on his/her visit and another user calling herself Michelle Arnold recommends they do not to do so (coco2, 2012). Yet another user asks whether or not to invite a lesbian relative and her girlfriend to a family gathering and Michelle Arnold recommends that they be very careful and weigh the pros and cons (thanhple 2010).

31 As an example for a recent discussion on the issue of dissent cf. Lash 2010; and the response to Lash’s essay by D’Costa 2012.
Today’s religious landscape is often characterized – and criticized – as a pick-and-choose mentality in a competitive religious marketplace and one can but wonder if this watchdog mentality is not a pick-and-choose mentality in itself, where the criteria for what is allowed into the safe haven are the words of the Pope – who is seen to be suffering from the disobedience in the Church – as well what can be found in the catechism of the Catholic Church. In doing so, however, kath.net community members themselves exert a pick-and-choose mentality because they fail to realize that Catholicity always also means multiplicity and never means blind obedience to rules and regulations for their own sake. A brief glimpse into Church history suffices to show that theology and faith have always been about struggles and debates rather than uncritical obedience.

In this narrow view, the utopia of the safe haven and the control mechanisms employed online to safeguard those safe havens become instruments of attempts to reshape and rewrite offline social and religious structures according to the utopia created online. In the words of Paul Ricoeur, utopia becomes pathological, which means it becomes a form of escapism:

The nowhere of utopia may become a pretext for escape, a way of fleeing the contradictions and ambiguity, both of the use of power and of the assumption of authority in a given situation. This escapism of utopia belongs to a logic of all or nothing. No connecting point exists between the ‘here’ of social reality and the ‘elsewhere’ of the utopia. This disjunction allows the utopia to avoid any obligation to come to grips with the real difficulties of a given society. All the regressive trends denounced so often in utopian thinkers – such as nostalgia for the past, for some paradise lost – proceed from this initial deviation of the nowhere in relation to the here and now (Ricoeur 1986: 17).

Kath.net followers also challenge the role of theology within the Church and question whether or not Catholic theology should be taught at public universities with faculties funded by the state, as is the case in Austria and Germany.

32 ‘It’s essential [for kath.net] to look towards Rome: the magisterium of the Pope, what he does and his concrete presence in the universal church are the guiding star for kath.net’s work. Related to this: for a Catholic, it is not possible to dissociate what he [sic!] does and what he is, i.e. Catholic, and this holds true in particular when one is working in information technology.’
An increasing number of kath.net followers argue that the Church should give up theology at public institutions altogether and teach seminarians at ecclesiastic institutions in order to have more and tighter control over professors, lecturers, and the kind of theology taught. Rather than supporting theology and its contribution to academia, theology – and with it the Church – should retreat from the world. Kath.net followers often recommend that professors who are not 100 per cent in line with Church teachings (in particular with regards to the hot issues) should go back to the books and read the catechism, because everything one needs to know is in there. Theology, then, is reduced to a process of merely repeating and reiterating the catechism rather than critically reflecting on Church teaching, or, more to the point: theology is reduced to a literal repetition of the catechism as divine truth. There is no notion whatsoever that theology can and should critically reflect on and challenge Church teaching or that the academic discipline always also finds itself in a tension with the hierarchy. Theologians who voice criticisms of Church teachings are often railed against and the operators of kath.net call their followers to action; to contact their local bishops to urge them to get rid of unwanted academics. More attention and research needs to be done with regards to real life consequences, but it is worrying enough that kath.net operators regularly prompt bishops to take action on whatever matter it is the kath.net community is not happy about.

In particular in discussions on celibacy or the ordination of women, many posts question the critical role of theology in uncovering the socio-cultural contexts of Church history and thus better understanding the current make up of the Church. Rather, many posts exhibit an ahistorical and a-cultural understanding of theology and the Church. In using the terms ahistoric and acultural I am referring to a lack of awareness that the Church is always also part of culture and speaks in the voice of this culture. This understanding is expressed in posts such as this one: ‘Beschwerden gegen das “Männerpriestertum” bitte direkt an den Administrator (Jesus@Heaven). Selbst der Papst kann das nicht gegen den Willen des Stifters ändern, der im Abendmahlsaal bekanntlich keine Frauen beauftragt hat (obwohl zumindest seine Mutter und Maria Magdalena damals sicherlich ‘in der Nähe’ oder sogar im Saal anwesend waren. . .)’ (Chris2, 2012, emphasis in original).33

33 ‘Critics should send their complaints against male priesthood directly to the Administrator (Jesus@Heaven). Even the Pope cannot change this against the will of the founder who, as is very well known, did not mandate women with the priesthood during the Last Supper (even though at least his mother and Mary Magdalene were almost certainly nearby or even in the same room).’
Finally and to conclude, Ricœur understands narratives to be a critical concept. According to Ricœur, narratives can create hypothetical worlds which we can use to experiment with and in. As such, they are a laboratory of meaning, a space for critical reflections on the issues we face in our everyday lives, a space that can enable us to discover something new, something we would not have noticed or realized otherwise. In its pathological form, however, there is a risk that narratives lose their critical potential. Every narrative has its counter-narratives. When these counter-narratives, however, are discarded or dismissed, the master narrative becomes what its name suggests: the exclusive frame through which the world is seen; or – to conclude with a reference to film: ‘One Ring [or in this case narrative] to rule them all.’

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Roland Noé (rn)
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Saß, Peter

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Stebauer, Christian

Suvada, Adrienne (kath.net)

Talbott, Stephen L.

thanple

Tina 13

tünnes

Twitter@KatholikenNet
ALEXANDER D. ORNELLA

van Dijk, Teun A.

waldi

Wodak, Ruth
Divination, or at least that branch of it that was once called inductive divination, may perhaps be considered an early form of information technology: it involves an input of information as well as an output of information, and between them, there is a process of random access to a kind of retrieval system. At any rate, divination has proven to be almost the ideal form of religious practice for the internet; in principle, at least, an act of divination may be fully accomplished on a personal computer. This paper will comparatively explore a number of perspectives on these relatively recent developments, which may possibly also help us towards a more qualified understanding of traditional forms of divination.

Many years ago, I developed a model for the analysis of divination procedures. Any act of divination involves, I believe, three successive elements:

1. An experiment or an observation of non-predictable features, leading to
2. An exemplar text, and
3. An \textit{ad hoc} interpretation of the exemplar text as relevant to the case in hand.

Since I have already presented this model at an International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) symposium on methodology in 1997 here in Åbo (Podemann Sørensen 1999), I shall be very brief about it, but for the sake of illustration, let us consider an easy example: on the fringes of the Protestant churches of northern Europe, there exists a divinatory practice involving so-called ‘manna-grains’. Manna-grains are tiny pieces of paper with biblical references drawn at random from a tray. This experiment thus leads the consultant directly into the exemplar text, the Bible; the verse indicated in the reference is looked up and interpreted \textit{ad hoc}, that is to say as a relevant statement on the matter in hand. Instead of seeking advice from the Bible in texts known to deal with rules of conduct or practical wisdom, the user of manna-grains leaves the choice of a text to chance, or to God, and in this way rules out any
question of relevance: the biblical text found by the divinatory act is relevant and must be made to bear on the matter in hand. This will sometimes involve allegorical interpretation and highly creative forms of hermeneutics.

The famous Chinese book of divination, the Yijing, is used in a very similar manner. An experiment with yarrow stalks or coins generates a hexagram. Each of the 64 possible hexagrams has a chapter in the Yijing, and texts from this chapter, often proverbial in style, will eventually be interpreted and brought to bear on the situation of the client. The West African Ifa or Fa system of divination, which has now spread all over the world, works in a perfectly analogous manner: experiments with palm nuts generate an octogram. To each of the 256 possible octagrams corresponds a number of oral texts. The diviner will recite one of the texts belonging to the octogram generated, and this text, which is proverbial and narrative in style and usually prescribes offerings that must be made in order for the client to succeed in his dealings, will be the basis for decisions.

The relative weight and importance of the stages in the divinatory process is different in the different traditions. In classical Ifa, the diviner should not even know the problem of the client, whereas the Yijing specialist will typically insist that the problem is stated very accurately. The user of manna-grains will sometimes take the biblical text just as an encouragement, not as leading directly to some precise decision or prediction, while the Ifa client simply has to bring the offerings prescribed. The roles taken in the negotiation towards decisions between the diviner and the client also vary greatly from tradition to tradition and even within the greater traditions.

The model as such is nothing more than a handy questionnaire, or a means of structuring an examination of a given divinatory procedure. In many cases, the divinatory process will run through more, or possibly fewer stages. The important point is that the process of divination consists in what I now call a metamorphosis of signs. It is a gradual ascription of more and more relevant meaning to originally insignificant observations such as the appetite of chickens, perforations in the entrails of a sacrificial animal, or the number of yarrow stalks left when you remove four as many times as you can from a heap of unknown size. Even a hexagram or an octogram are not yet signs, but become signs only in the light of the exemplar text, which attaches a still not complete and useful meaning to them. Even now, the very open and often enigmatic exemplar texts are verbal signs, but still not precise and pertinent in

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their meanings. Only when applied to the problem or the situation of a client do their proverbial or symbolic statements acquire useful meanings.

It is this manipulated growth of meaning, almost by insensible degrees, that makes the outcome of an act of divination look very much like a revelation, a statement that has authority because its origin is beyond the situation it deals with. And it is precisely this metamorphosis of signs that a digital divination procedure must be able to perform. As a matter of fact, the three systems of divination already mentioned: manna-grains, Yiijing and Ifa, do all exist as digital options. A Danish website (Hapasu.dk 2012), designed by Hans Pauli Sundstein, offers 760 manna-grains, selected from the 1992 Danish translation of the Bible and introduced by the short prayer: ‘May God bless his word for you in rich measure.’ A grain is picked by clicking on one of the 760 numbers on the page. Quite as if it had been picked from a tray, a biblical reference appears, and one more click makes the biblical text itself appear, even with a link to the context from which it was taken – and a link back to the page with the 760 numbers, where a new manna-grain may be picked. The conclusion is easy to draw: there is nothing in the traditional manna-grain procedure that this digital version cannot fully perform and accomplish. And for people with a visual handicap like the designer, it offers the possibility that with the relevant equipment, manna-grains may be used without an assistant.

Manna-grains are obviously easily digitalized. It is a very straightforward form of divination, and above all, its diviner and its client are one and the same person or group of persons. It does not involve a negotiation concerning the matter in hand, except for the one that goes on in the mind of the client when faced with what is God’s word for her or him. Other forms of divination are much more of a challenge. Websites proffering Yiijing consultations usually remain faithful to tradition insofar as a question must be asked at the outset. Sometimes also its context of relevance – for example, family and friends, business and career etc. – must be stated. In addition, the user may sometimes choose between the age-old method of using the yarrow stalks, the simpler method with coins and sometimes a third method. It is difficult to ascertain how this choice affects the outcome, but all these methods are basically methods of randomization. It seems that this randomization is really accomplished. The user will get a hexagram with young and old lines and often the choice between the two classical translations, that of James Legge and the celebrated Wilhelm translation and in addition sometimes also a modern, psychologizing adaptation of the traditional text.\(^2\) Left with a more or less

canonical text, the digital client must, for the rest of the procedure, be his own diviner, very much as is the user of manna-grains. One of the websites proffering online consultations of the *Yijing* (Facade 2012) has probably tried to remedy the lack of an experienced and empathic diviner by a slight de-randomization of the selection of hexagrams and texts. Apparently key words in questions connect to texts with relevant content and their hexagrams. In this way the client will often find that the chapter selected has at least some passages relevant to his question. This is an obvious possibility that the digital medium has, but it may of course be debated whether this is really divination or just a manipulated search in a database.

De-randomization is, however, not limited to digital divination. Late antiquity knew a method of divination called *Sortes Astrampsychi*, a name that was probably as mystifying then as it is now (cf. Stoneman 2011: 144–7). From a book, one of 91 numbered questions was chosen by the user, who was then told to add a number between 1 and 10 to the number of the question. By consulting a special table he or she was then to convert this sum into still another number, which would then be the number of the answer. This answer would always be perfectly relevant and straightforward, for as a matter of fact the calculations recommended between the question and the answer would always lead directly from each question to one of a number of relevant answers predestined by the editors. This was obviously an extremely robust kind of de-randomization. Neither fate, providence, God, nor *dao* had any opportunity to influence the result, except through the user’s choice of a number between 1 and 10. A user discovering the true nature of this editorial predestination would probably feel some degree of disappointment. It really makes modern, digital, partial de-randomization seem innocent.

West African *Ifa* divination is certainly well-known on the internet, but websites proffering an online accomplishment of an act of *Ifa* divination are very few. One of them, Ifaluade.com (no longer extant), is really nothing but an electronic correspondence with the chief priest of the Ajigbotifa Temple, who will cast *Ifa* for his electronically mediated client and send an email with the report within two days. The website does not always open, but has been the occasion of some debate. A lot of West Africans live in diaspora, and some of them find it excellent to have this opportunity to consult a classical *babalawo*. Others find it ridiculous and ask what will be next – digital sacrifice, perhaps?³ Another website comes closer to a proper online divination; it proffers something called *digital opele* (the Yoruba word *opele* means

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‘a messenger of Ifá’), a ‘random generator’, which will generate an octogram, as if the procedure with the palm nuts had been accomplished. The user may then find the text corresponding to the octogram in the same website’s version of the Ifá text corpus.4 This means that a full act of Ifá divination may be accomplished online. There is no negotiation with an empathic diviner, but at least classical Ifá divination can also be done without empathy and advice. In this case, the diviner is not expected to know the problem of the client, and all that the client has to do is to bring the sacrifices prescribed by the exemplar text recited to him.

It is interesting, however, that modern Western religiosity seems to resist forms of divination that exclude empathy and other kinds of psychological or spiritual influences on the outcome. There is a conviction, although never very explicit, that the personality and the thoughts and feelings of both client and diviner somehow influence the act of divination. This makes online divination very problematic to some potential users. In 2008, there was a debate on Pagan Network Forum (2012) in which a certain ‘Twilightgirl’ asked:

... Do people feel they can actually influence the outcome of the cards or whatever reading it is you are choosing to do with a few clicks on the mouse ...?

Another network member replied that the client ‘must be there or at least something belonging to that person’, and a guest added that online divination meant ‘separating the querent from the Spiritual aspect of divination’. A concomitant aspect of this doubtful attitude towards the online accomplishment of an act of divination may be the idea that a religious act must have some degree of social existence. In modern Judaism, individual prayers may be virtually placed at the Western Wall of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, but suggestions that the minyan – the ten male participants necessary in liturgical prayer – may be virtually united via the internet, are met with strong objections (cf. Cohen 2012: 9–11).

The fact that mouse and monitor are probably unable to transmit the vibrations of human souls has, however, hardly limited the number of websites proffering online divination, and the more traditional idea, that divination

4 The site <www_ifa-orisha.com/jaaps_ifa-readings/digitalopele-divination/index.html> (2012) is run by one man, Jaap Verduijn, and has now changed into a restricted membership site called Ilé Dafa. The 2012 address is no longer valid. Cf. now Ilé Dafa 2013.
transmits what we might call superhuman influence, still survives. When I was worried about giving this presentation within a field rather far from my usual studies in the religions of antiquity, I consulted the website of The Morningstar Online Angel Oracle (2012). According to its welcome page, Angelic energies come down upon users who click on the phrase 'Angel Guidance,' written 36 times on the same page. I clicked on one of them and got the Angel of Success, a quotation from Goethe and a long text full of encouragement – so here I am!

The oracle is basically a form of stichomancy, very much like manna-grains, but once again shows that a full act of divination can be accomplished online – that is, if we can do without human empathy and human unconscious influences on an otherwise random access to a treasury of exemplar texts. In no other way is digital divination less real than traditional divination. Acts of divination were always observations of the virtual: The bab ekallim or palace gate on an Old Babylonian liver was not the real palace gate, but a virtual one, chosen by diviners as a matrix of what would happen to the royal house (cf. Jeyes 1978 and 1989: 60–1). Similarly, the Line of Life studied in palmistry is not life itself, but a virtual biometric instrument that the diviner understands to read. And inasmuch as the observations are unpredictable or the access to exemplar texts is randomized, nothing prevents dao, fate, God, Providence or Angelic energies from also influencing or even governing online acts of divination.

This novel option does, however, add to an ongoing development towards very private or, as they are sometimes called, invisible forms of religion. The very social homo religiosus, always engaged in building hierarchies and legitimizing the central structure of society, certainly still exists – but so do lonely twilight-girls, who may now accomplish acts of divination on a personal computer. It is a development very similar to what we find in the Greek and Demotic magical papyri of Roman Egypt (Betz 1996). In many respects, these papyri represent a miniaturization for private use of a religion that once populated huge temples with priestly hierarchies and was the very foundation of a powerful state (cf. Frankfurter 1998: 143–4, 224–37). They actually provide instruction on how to dress up as an Egyptian high priest and arrange, in your own drawing room or sleeping chamber, a face-to-face encounter with a god in a dream or some kind of self-induced vision. Often these arranged visions served to validate a horoscope, or as the more dramatic part of other rites of divination. For many years I thought of this as the ultimate transposi-

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5 The idea of 'invisible religion' was introduced by Thomas Luckmann (1967).
tion of religion into individual private life. But no doubt the digital world may take us even further.

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Digital hajj

The pilgrimage to Mecca in Muslim cyberspace and the issue of religious online authority

Introduction

Each year, at a strictly appointed time, the city of Mecca – still the undisputed epicentre of the Muslim universe – becomes the site of one of the largest annual pilgrimages and, as is oftentimes pointed out, probably the greatest mass gathering worldwide (Bianchi 2004: 3). Between the eighth and the thirteenth days of the (twelfth and) final month of the Islamic lunar calendar, called dhu l-hijja, almost three million Muslim men and women from virtually every country congregate there in order communally to perform a prescribed series of ritual actions wearing a special garment, which consists of two white seamless cloths (ihram); constantly chanting the so-called talbiya, a prayer that begins with the word labbaika; circumambulating the cuboidal building of the Ka’ba in an anti-clockwise direction on arrival and before departing; running seven times between two hillocks named Safa and Marwa; standing for half a day in the desert on the plain of Arafat; throwing pebbles at stone columns representing the devil, and sacrificing animals at Mina (Gaudefroy-Demombynes 1923: 168–91, 205–321; von Grunebaum 1976: 26–35; Martins 1987: 339–45; Haleem 2012: 27–58). Enshrined in the Qur’ān – at sura 3, verse 97 – the hajj constitutes, as is known, the fifth of the five pillars which are essential to Muslim belief. It is a, so to speak, sacred duty towards God enjoined upon every adult Muslim of either sex, insofar as he has sufficient financial resources at his disposal and is physically capable, to undertake the spiritual journey to the sacred precinct of Mecca and its environs at least once in his lifetime. According to Islamic understanding, the faithful reenact in detail the sequence of ritual acts performed by the prophet Muhammad himself in that the given ritual assemblages which constitute the annual pilgrimage to Mecca are usually considered as having remained unchanged since its beginning during the lifetime of Islam’s founding figure. The hajj itself is supposed to create a sense of cohesion and to demonstrate the unifying force of Islam, bringing together believers from all parts of the globe in today’s Saudi Arabia.
Given the afore-alluded importance of the pilgrimage to Mecca in Islam, it is hardly surprising that users surfing on the net for the term *hajj* are faced with dozens of more or less relevant web pages. Furthermore, a quick trawl of the internet shows that the annual Muslim pilgrimage is represented online in a plethora of forms: online-bookable *hajj* packages, suiting all budgets and tastes can be found alongside step-by-step instructions for future Mecca pilgrims and downloadable audio examples of *hajj* recitations and prayers, as well as accounts of individual pilgrimages and, last but not least, cyber or virtual *hajj in Second Life*, directed not only at the ‘armchair pilgrim’ but also the non-Muslim, who is, as is commonly known, not just not allowed to observe or participate in the pilgrimage to Mecca, but who is as a matter of principle denied entry to the cities both of Mecca and Medina, even outside the annual season of the *hajj*.

The present paper attempts to give an overview of the different representations of the pilgrimage to Mecca found in the ‘liminal space’ of the internet. For that purpose, it examines a handful of emblematic examples of how the *hajj* is being presented and discussed in cyberspace. Thereby, special attention shall be paid to the question of how far issues of religious authority are manifest on these websites, whether the content providers of web pages appoint themselves as authorities by scrutinizing established views of the fifth pillar of Islam, or if they upload already printed texts onto their sites in order to reiterate normative notions of the pilgrimage to Mecca, or if they make use of search engine optimisation techniques, thus heightening the very visibility of their online presence and increasing the possibility of becoming authoritative in shaping internet surfers’ perceptions of the *hajj*.

The relationship that exists between the now not-so-new media formed on the internet on the one hand with Islam or Muslim groups and on the other with individuals so far amounts to a set of relatively young and thus by and large still underdeveloped areas of scholarly investigation. However, one of the issues that has been hotly debated so far is the question of to what extent computer-mediated forms of communication offer the potential not only of affirming existing, conventional forms of authority structures and knowledge production and dissemination in the Islamic context, but also to put forward new approaches to Islamic ideas and viewpoints, thereby challenging the legitimacy of the learned scholars of Islam in the non-virtual world. Some scholars have viewed the popular emergence of the world wide web as one that, far from democratising religious knowledge, would rather preserve traditional authorities as represented by the formally trained *ulama* and safeguard established perspectives on Islam instead of leading to a renegotiation of power and symbolic capital in the discursive arena.
However, more commonly, the advent of the popular internet – being a mass medium with potentially easy accessibility and on which a gate-keeping function, as is exercised by the more traditional mass media, is rarely being performed – has been seen as an opportunity to open up intra-Islamic discourses to wider audiences as well as a potential means whereby Muslim individuals and groups might take on leadership roles as spokespersons of Islam, thus threatening the role of the ulama as the undisputed interpreters of canonic knowledge. Roughly speaking, in this rather idealistic view of the internet as a decentralised and mass-participatory medium with the capacity to give each individual the opportunity to be heard in a transnational and potentially almost global public sphere, it appears to offer marginalised or voiceless individuals and groups, such as women, youth, converts or Muslim minority groups an inexpensive and quite fashionable platform which allows them to make their viewpoints known to large numbers of people and to represent themselves to the wider world as authentic voices of Islam (Harms 2007: 157–8; Inan 2009: 89–91; Linjakumpu 2007: 5–7).

In various seminal studies on the impact of the internet on issues of authority in Muslim contexts Jon W. Anderson, for instance, has discussed the world wide web as some sort of a new public space which has enabled a new class of interpreters of Islam who are inherently facilitated by the internet to reframe patterns of authority and to take Islam into their own hands (Anderson 2002: 303–4 and 2003: 45). Along the same lines, Gary Bunt has noted that in the pre-internet era Muslims sought advice and guidance from local, community-based religious scholars who had as a background a formal training in Islamic sciences at acknowledged teaching institutions such as al-Azhar or the Dar al-ulum in Deoband. In the digital age, though, autodidactic ‘lay’ interpreters lacking such a classical, recognized training are empowered to easily bypass the ulama and put themselves forward as experts or authorities on Islamic issues by just having an online presence and, as a result, can easily play authoritative roles in the lives of fellow Muslims looking for direction (Bunt 2009: 32).

**Websites centred on providing information**

Not surprisingly, a very common pattern among websites related to the hajj are pages which are largely oriented towards the provision of solicited information about various issues associated with the annual Muslim pilgrimage. A noteworthy example of this type of website is hajinformation.com, a site that is ranks in the top ten results of a simple Google query for the search term ‘hajj’.
This website is a particularly clear instance of what could be termed the organisational, or quasi-official face of the pilgrimage to Mecca, in that it constitutes the official online presence of the 1962-created Saudi Ministry of Hajj, based in Riad. Offering its content both in English and French, the website of the Ministry of Hajj is apparently specifically designed to provide a comprehensive online information service on various aspects of the Meccan pilgrimage.

This includes a canonised history of the *hajj* which states that the sequence of the rites associated with the pilgrimage to Mecca were laid down by God himself in order to mark historic events in the life of Abraham. Accordingly, the website reiterates the very story of how Abraham, together with his son Ishmael, erected the Ka’ba as a house of monotheistic worship, to imply that conducting the *hajj* pilgrimage is indeed not only retracing the steps of Muhammad, but those of Abraham as well. Part and parcel of the official website of the Saudi Ministry of Hajj are also sections on stages of the pilgrimage to Mecca and its various rituals, on the prayers commonly used during the *hajj*, on the state one must enter before performing the pilgrimage and the efforts of the Saudi government to facilitate the *hajj*, such as the construction of pedestrian tunnels leading into Mecca. Furthermore, the website incorporates a section of frequently-asked questions about the *hajj*, in which queries such
as how to travel to the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where to get a visa for the entry into it, what the weather is like in the cities of Mecca and Medina, and so on, are answered. In addition, it features a list of approved hajj travel agencies in the whole world and provides not just more or less photogenic pictures of Mecca and its environs, but also flash animation clips of the Ka’ba. Further, amongst other things, site visitors can view two so-called ‘safety films’ which give them specific advice on how to undertake the annual pilgrimage safely. One important feature of hajinformation.com is that it does provide an email address for the purpose of directly contacting the ministry, but nevertheless, on the whole, the site remains in a ‘1.0’ web mode in that is a non-interactive, one-way broadcasting service, thereby preventing site visitors from potentially subverting the authority of the ministry, or even promoting alternative readings of the hajj.

Among the probably most prominent websites aimed at featuring multi-layered information on the pilgrimage to Mecca and making use of the lingua franca of the internet is IslamiCity.com. It scores highly within common search engines such as Google – especially conditioned by the fact that its operators have taken advantage of the discourse-reducing effects of search engines by purchasing three domain names, namely islam.org, islamicity.org and islamicity.com, with the effect that IslamiCity.com possesses at least two memorable Islamic URL names. The IslamiCity site was actually established and is maintained by HADI, an acronym which stands for Human Assistance and Development International, a Saudi overseas holding company based in Culver City in California (Bunt 2000: 25–6 and 2004: 128–9; Brückner 2001: 17; Lawrence 2002: 242–3), which characterises itself as a non-profit organisation working for the socio-economic and educational development of people worldwide (IslamiCity.com 2012a). This website, which is considered to be one of the main Wahhabi players on the world wide web, constitutes a quite comprehensive portal to the Muslim religion and the Qur’an whose primary aim is, according to its producers, sharing with the world an understanding of Islam and Muslims as well as the promotion of peace, justice and harmony for all (IslamiCity.com 2012c). Going online in 1995, the IslamiCity site, which boasts of having serviced almost 1.2 billion requests since January 2001, was at the end of October 2012, ranked number 36,041 in a list of the most popular of all websites by the Alexa search engine, which in turn notes more than 3,309 sites linking to it.

Rather than listing the various hajj-related items of content which can be found on the IslamiCity site, which contains what it calls a Hajj Information Center (IslamiCity.com 2012b), at least one point may be stressed here.
A notable characteristic of this section of IslamiCity.com is that some of its representations of the *hajj* are to a certain degree merely reiterating and replicating already existing offline sources, far from creating much that is really original, or even innovative. Muslim (and non-Muslim) cybernauts find, for instance, some brochures stored in a pdf-format bearing titles such as a *'Practical Guide for Hajj'* which have been gleaned from other sources and simply recycled. Apart from that, the HADI-sponsored site links to items of the Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Washington and the Saudi Ministry of Hajj concerning visa (Saudiembassy.net 2012) and health requirements (Hajinformation.com 2012b). In contrast to this, however, it is somewhat perplexing that IslamiCity.com, with its Saudi background, does not refrain from connecting to a rather prominent Shi’i website. Visitors to IslamiCity’s Hajj Information Center are offered a link that takes them to al-islam.org, established in 1998 by the Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project and registered to an address in Minnesota, where they find an English translation of one of the most prominent publications on the fifth pillar of Islam written in the twentieth century (al-Islam.org 2012): Ali Shariati’s *Hajj*, in which the pre-revolutionary Iranian thinker (1933–77) readily attributed to the pilgrimage to Mecca a symbolic significance with social and political implications (Benson 1991: 18–26; Bianchi 2004: 28–32). Just to pick out one
noteworthy example, in Shariati’s rereading of the *hajj*, the three columns that the pilgrims pelt stones at during the *hajj* represent despotism, capitalism and hypocrisy (Shariati 1993: 68).

**The online performance of pilgrimage activities**

As another genre of *hajj*-related websites one could classify pages which allow internet surfers to ‘visit’ the key loci of the annual Muslim pilgrimage and conduct it virtually. Thus, for instance, Princeton.edu (2012), a web page which unfortunately does not reveal any information about the uploader of its content, provides a clickable diagram of the route and various stages of the *hajj*. Clicking on this takes the site user to poorly-proportioned pictorial representations of each stage of the Meccan pilgrimage and alongside these there is a brief account of the various ritual actions the non-virtual pilgrim is obliged to perform during the course of it. In comparison, a slightly more enticingly designed version of a cyber *hajj* is offered on a section of the website of the US television Public Broadcasting Service channel (PBS 2012).

In a similar fashion to the aforementioned web page it tries to impart elementary information on the *hajj* and provide virtual participation by giving its visitors basic descriptions of the different phases of the pilgrimage to Mecca, supplemented by corresponding images.

Yet perhaps the most prominent and up to now most sophisticated simulation of the Meccan pilgrimage in the internet landscape is featured in the three-dimensional virtual reality environment known as Second Life. Programmed and launched by the San Francisco-based Linden Lab in 2003, Second Life is a massively multiplayer online role-playing
game (MMORPG), which has especially become known to a wider public through the media hype it received in early 2007, although apparently it has now passed the height of its popularity. This ‘Metaverse’ constitutes a user-generated virtual world in which the users – called ‘residents’ – interact, communicate, play and trade through customisable, graphic representations of themselves, named as avatars (Johnson 2010). Meanwhile, Second Life has more than 31 million registered users worldwide, of whom as many as 33,000 are simultaneously logged into the system around the clock (Gridsurvey.com 2012).

The current online recreation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca (al-masjid al-haram) along with the major hajj locations (Second Life 2012), which had at least one precursor (Derrickson 2008; Sisler 2009: 253–5), was released in November 2009 by the Mada Media Development Association.

This Cairo-based organisation, whose self-description declares that it is a non-profit, civil society institution with the essential objective of serving Muslims and introducing Islam in its true form to non-Muslims around the world (OnIslam.net 2012b), is actually the owner company of OnIslam.net, a website constituting an offshoot of IslamOnline.net, one of the most prominent Islam-related Arabic/English web portals. Blurring the boundaries be-
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tween education and entertainment, the designers of OnIslam’s immersive hajj simulation pursue a dual purpose: they seek not only to enhance their coreligionists’ understanding of the fifth pillar of Islam and minimise their mistakes when they engage in the ‘real’, that is to say, terrestrial, hajj, but also to make interested non-Muslims acquainted with the major rituals of the hajj and its meanings, thereby actually debunking possible misperceptions about one of the world’s largest annual pilgrimages (Solayman 2010). Its builders also put great stress on the claim that a legally valid hajj cannot, under any circumstances, be accomplished online and that therefore the engagement in Second Life’s hajj simulation cannot be a substitute for the ‘real’ journey to the cradle of Islam. It is not surprising then that OnIslam.net posted an online fatwa, delivered in response to the question as to which particular stance Muslims should take toward the Second Life recreation of the Meccan pilgrimage. This fatwa, which was issued in May 2009 by the Kerala-born Canadian scholar Ahmad Kutty (b. 1946), currently a senior lecturer at the Islamic Institute of Toronto, essentially maintains that a Muslim may not exchange the, as it were, ‘in-world’ journey to Mecca with its counterpart in virtual space (OnIslam.net 2012a).

Websites with commercial interests

Given the status of the hajj as a canonical duty which canalises Muslims from every corner of the globe into travelling and inevitably becoming pilgrim-tourists, it is not really surprising that the internet, because of its commercial nature, is nowadays also very much a medium by means of which the prospective Mecca pilgrim is offered a variety of products and services fitting his needs: a vast array of mass-tour operators and travel agencies as well as companies specialising in ‘Islamic goods’ utilise the world wide web as a tool to both purvey and sell accommodation bookings, organised pilgrimage tours, or items and goods specifically related to the annual Muslim pilgrimage, such as ihram garments, hajj board games and pocket-sized step-by-step guides. Apart from a site actually operated by travel firms offering hajj tours and through which items for the pilgrimage to Mecca are sold online, there are a considerable number of websites involved in hajj business, which, interestingly, seek in a way a vital coexistence of information and commerce.

Thus, for instance, the already mentioned IslamiCity site is actually oriented towards overt economic ends as well, although it describes itself primarily as an informational page which provides or enhances knowledge about the
fifth pillar of Islam. It is a promotional site in that it does subtly try to prompt Muslims into becoming faith tourists and undertaking the *hajj* by presenting appealing screensavers, short videos and images of the Meccan pilgrimage, while at the same time unilaterally providing useful information to assist prospective pilgrims in planning to embark on the *hajj*. In addition, the site actively promotes a wide range of *hajj* packages that one can choose, ranging from a so-called ‘Walking Hajj Program’, for which nearly $5,000 is charged, to a ‘Short Executive Program’ which includes accommodation in five star hotels at a cost of about $10,800. IslamiCity.org also features an online store where site users are offered opportunities to purchase *hajj*-specific products, ranging from *hajj* guidebooks to *ihram* clothing.

**Websites designed to issue a critique**

An examination of what appears in Muslim cyberspace relating to the Meccan pilgrimage suggests that there are countless examples of web pages promoting nothing other than a mainstream interpretation of the *hajj*, bolstering the authority of what might be called traditional perceptions, whereas online attacks of the same thing, combined with the dissemination of an alternative understanding of the last of the five pillars of Islam are, thus far, seldom to be found. However, a striking example of a fairly prominent attempt by a Muslim minority group to set up and run a website in order to, among other things, offer a critique of established perceptions of the *hajj* and for whom the web, because of its alleged ‘open democracy’ provides a suitable platform to get across in the public domain what they identify as the proper understanding and right way of the annual Muslim pilgrimage, is the Submission site. Being more the exception than the rule, this comparatively simply designed site explicitly raises the question whether the ritual pilgrimage to Mecca is undertaken in a valid form nowadays. Thus, the operators of Submission.org – United Submitters International (also known under the self-designation ‘the Submitters’) – are affirming a particular form of self-appointed authority in the field, irrespective of how far such self-appointment might materialise into an external or collective acceptance of authority. United Submitters International is a Tucson-based group that goes back to the teachings of the Egyptian-American biochemist Rashad Khalifa (1935–90), who did not only assert that the Qur’an evinces a peculiar mathematical structure based on the number 19, but also claimed to be, alongside Muhammad and Abraham, one of the messengers of Islam (Haddad and Smith 1993: 137–68; Gardell 1996: 137–68; Gardell 1996:
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He represented a much-noticed, yet marginalised tendency in what has been called Islamic modernism, which in turn has been labelled with the disputable term ‘Islamic Protestantism’ on the grounds that it decidedly dismisses the *sunna*, that is to say, the exemplary behaviour and words of Islam’s founding figure, as a post-Muhammad distortion (Gardell 1996: 177).

In the eyes of the authors of Submission.org, who claim to follow the Qur’anic text alone as the only valid and divine source of religious law and guidance (Submission.org 2012a), the *hajj* pilgrimage was corrupted by traditions and innovations such as showing veneration for the Black Stone which is embedded in the Ka’ba, or regarding the water of the Zamzam Well as being blessed.

In particular, they argue that the very conviction that undertaking the annual pilgrimage to Mecca is only allowed in the last month of the Islamic calendar constitutes a mistake. Espousing an alternative view that will certainly not achieve broad acceptance within Muslim communities, they present the *hajj* to the web user as a sacred duty which can be fulfilled not only in the month of *dhu l-hijja*, but in three other months as well (Submission.org 2012b).
Concluding remarks

In sum, as has been already argued, repeated searches involving typing a variety of terms related to the Meccan pilgrimage into search engines suggest that web pages which contest mainstream interpretations of the *hajj*, or even question it as a valid form of Muslim faith seem, thus far, to be more the exception than the rule. Yet, there is admittedly some evidence that the very investigation of the realms of respective individual weblogs and podcasts might change this impression in one way or another.

Apart from that, another point should be stressed. In order to draw more accurate conclusions about the manifestations of religious online authority on the websites analysed here a content analysis is not really sufficient. Rather, it is necessary to amalgamate it with a survey of both the reception of its content and the material’s consumer audience. This calls for answers to questions such as, how do the bodies who are behind the websites intend the content available on it to be used and in which way do the page recipients *de facto* use the site materials (Cowan 2011: 463–464)? In turn, this implies that a basic content analysis should be essentially combined with empirical fieldwork based on questionnaires and qualitative interviews with runners and designers of web pages, as well as with individual internet consumers (Krüger 2005: 19).

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Does the ‘old’ media’s coverage of religion matter in times of ‘digital religion’?

When I was in Britain, working on a project which involved studying the coverage of religion in the media, one of the most common questions people asked was not related to the content of media coverage. It was about the ‘new’ media. No matter whether I was conversing with a scholar, media producer, journalist, friend or ordinary man in the local pub, the question was almost invariably: are you going to focus on the ‘new’ media?

After getting used to answering this question I started to expect it, and at academic conferences I usually answered before anyone had a chance to ask. I began to wonder why people think that the ‘old’ media is no longer important. Media professionals were fascinated by the ‘new’ media, but perhaps not as much as the constantly tweeting members of various think tanks I was fortunate enough to encounter at several conferences.

My reflections turned into a provocation: if someone is studying religion in the ‘new’ media, practically no-one is asking them to take the ‘old’ media into account; but if someone is studying the ‘old’ media, a typical first reaction is to question the rationale of study unless a major part of it is re-focused on the ‘new’ media. This article is not, however, a critique of the study of ‘new’ media. The study of digital religion and religion in the ‘new’ media, especially in tracing the transformation of communities, ideas, practices and forms of interaction which people tend to classify as religious, has already proved fruitful. What is not well-justified is the assumption that the ‘old’ media does not really matter anymore. This is something to be examined, although the structures and business models of the mainstream media are changing because of the ‘new’, digital media. Furthermore, we need to explore the interac-

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1 ‘Media Portrayals of Religion and the Secular Sacred: A Longitudinal Study of British Newspaper and Television Representations and Their Reception’ was funded by the Religion and Society Research Programme between 2008 and 2010 and the rest of the team consisted of Professor Kim Knott and Senior Lecturer Elizabeth Poole. See Knott et al. 2013, Taira et al. 2012.
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tions between ‘old’ and ‘new’ media, what emerges from their convergence, and start theorising about its implications in the context of religion.

Some of the things that will be dealt with apply to the media in general. Only some are religion-specific. However, the intention is not to repeat what media scholars have already said about intermediality, media convergence and the relationship between ‘old’ and ‘new’ media. The reflections shared here are rather based on my empirical research of religion in the media, especially in the ‘old’ mainstream mass media in Britain and Finland. Much of what will be said may well be trivial, but if the ‘common sense’ of scholars and media professionals has followed the ‘new’ media hype, then the following reflections may well be acute.

Conceptually it is not the most elegant choice to talk about ‘old’ and ‘new’ media. The terms are even more problematic if ‘old’ is understood to be referring to a thing of the past, or to something bygone and if ‘new’ is understood to be implying relevance. However, the terms are used here ‘under erasure’, meaning that they are inadequate yet necessary terms for clarifying the roles of the different media in relation to religion. ‘Old’ refers primarily to mainstream media, such as newspapers, television and radio, while ‘new’ refers primarily to websites, blogs, mobile phones (including applications) and social media. The distinction gets even more complicated when thinking about the online presence of newspapers: the technology is ‘new’, but the content is produced by ‘old’ media. Furthermore, to use the term ‘digital’ instead of ‘new’ is not without its problems either. It is easy to understand what the term ‘digital religion’ refers to, but in the context of thinking about the convergence of ‘old’ and ‘new’ media, talk about ‘digital’ can be confusing, as practically all media are digital nowadays.

What follows is an exploration of how and why the ‘old’ media still matters, if it does at all, based on my experiences in researching religion in the media. Three observations will be examined – that people do use the ‘old’ media, that sources of popular ‘new’ media stories are often mediated by ‘old’ media houses and news agencies, and that people still care about ‘old’ media’s coverage of religion – in order to finish by suggesting that it might be useful to go beyond the binary opposition of ‘old’ and ‘new’.

People’s use of the ‘old’ media

The most obvious observation suggesting the continuing significance of the ‘old’ media is that people still read newspapers, listen to the radio and watch
television (see Poole and Taira 2013; McNair 2005: 21; Pietilä 2007: 130–1; Temple 2008: 93; Vehkoo 2011). However, newspaper circulation and consumption figures have decreased significantly in the past two decades, even in Finland, where the level of newspaper readership is exceptionally high.\(^2\) Especially young people are less attached to newspapers: in 1991, 90 per cent of Finnish youth aged between 15 and 24 followed newspapers, but in 2011 this had decreased to 70 per cent – which is still a relatively high proportion (Vehkoo 2011: 29–30; see also Pietilä 2007: 134–5, 165–6, 185).

Certainly there are changes going on. To take my students of religion in the media class as an example, four out of twelve had a television at home; no one mentioned the radio as an aspect of their media use and only three were currently subscribers of a printed daily newspaper. University students are a far from representative selection of young adults in Finland, but most adults have been surprised when I have told them about the media usage of these students. This indicates that something is changing. However, the changes have not killed off the ‘old’ media. For instance, printed letters in opinion pages in newspapers still have much more prestige than opinions shared on discussion forums or newspaper websites. As the Finnish media professional and analyst A-P. Pietilä (2007: 120) suggests, with only a little hyperbole, to publish a letter in *Helsingin Sanomat* – the most influential newspaper in Finland – is almost equivalent in terms of prestige and merit to publishing an article in a scholarly journal. Indeed, 2010 was record year for letters to the editor in *Helsingin Sanomat*, and the most popular topic was a religion-related controversy – Gay Night, which will be discussed later in this article (*Helsingin Sanomat*, 31.12.2010).

However, despite the massive changes in the media sphere and the opportunities which this transformation has opened up, recent studies on religion and media tend to overemphasise the ‘new’ media, and in some cases limit their scope to the ‘new’ media. This becomes fairly obvious when looking at the book market in the area of religion and media scholarship, as there are plenty of excellent textbooks on religion and ‘new’ media.\(^3\) By contrast, there

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2 This is not only because of the internet and ‘new’ media, as the decrease started before the internet became popular among the masses.

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have never been as many widely distributed, up-to-date studies on religion and/in the ‘old’ media – at least not in the European context. Furthermore, many studies that deal with religion in the ‘new’ media do not seriously take the ‘old’ media into account. This is partly because scholars tend to chart relatively unexplored territories, but the overall outcome is still the same – a shortage of recent studies focusing on mainstream mass media.

To say that people still use the ‘old’ media is not to predict that hard copies of newspapers will stay in the pole position in religion-related issues or any other topic. On the contrary, some media outlets, such as The Guardian in Britain, are actively developing business models which situate their website as the most important point of access to the information (Vehkoo 2011). Furthermore, as far as I am aware, there are no media analysts who would argue for an increasingly significant role for newspaper hard copies in the media sphere. This, however, does not mean the end of the daily press, though it does have implications for reading habits and journalistic production. For instance, reading a web page and following various links is quite different from the experience of reading or browsing an actual newspaper, which is more ‘closed’ in its form (Pietilä 2007: 96). In addition, in the world of the web it is easier to switch to the next source if the current one does not provide enough information. Moreover, people are not reading or browsing the whole newspaper in the digital world. Perhaps people never read the whole hard copy either, but at least many readers will have browsed through every page. This has been taken into account so that people could use hard copy and internet side by side. One recent trend is so-called ‘layer reporting’ which means that the most general information is printed in the newspaper with reference to more detailed information and explication in the newspaper’s blogs, with links to yet more specific material. From the perspective of religion in the media, it is interesting that the chief editor of The Guardian, Alan Rusbridger (2010), pointed to the work of the religious affairs correspond-

ent of *The Times*, Ruth Gledhill, as an inspired example of layer reporting. In other words, there are massive changes going on in the world of the ‘old’ mainstream media, but the rumours about its death are premature. Daily printed papers may have passed their moment, but television is still almost ubiquitous, despite the fact that watching television is commonly combined with the use of the internet and mobile phones (texting, for example). If the information about religion is received from ‘the media’, it still often means the ‘old’ media, because people are using it.

**The sources of popular stories about religion in the ‘new’ media are often based on the ‘old’ media**

My second observation concerns the sources of religious affairs stories which become popular in the ‘new’ media. By looking at the origins of news stories which circulate on Facebook and are commented upon in various blogs, Twitter and discussion forums, it is obvious that they are often based on news originating from mainstream media houses and news agencies. Even when the origin is located somewhere else, popular stories are typically mediated by the mainstream media.

To take another example from my students, they were not active users of ‘old’ media technologies, but when asked about their media use, they all said that in addition to television programmes which are available online, they follow major Finnish newspapers online, typically the biggest one and a local one. This habit is further evidenced by statistics on the most popular websites. The Finnish websites which gather most hits are the two main tabloids, the news service of a major commercial television channel, the biggest daily newspaper and the public broadcasting company. The most popular discussion forum follows after these.

4 ‘The paper will carry a paragraph on a controversial sermon by the Bishop of Chichester. Gledhill will explain its significance on her blog, and link to the full sermon for those who want the source. Readers can then debate the text on the blog and follow other links’ (Rusbridger 2010). Furthermore, newspapers will monitor the digital debate at least on their own website and give reports about it. For instance, in Finland the enactment of a Finnish atheist bus advertising campaign was covered in no more than 33 newspaper articles (including 11 opinion letters) in the three biggest morning papers, but the papers referred to a lively debate that was going on on their websites (Panttila 2012).

5 The websites, starting from the most popular are *Iltalehti*, *Ilta-Sanomat*, MTV3, *Helsingin Sanomat* and YLE. Statistics are based on week 15, 2012. TNS Gallup 2012.
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Some students mentioned major international news services. One mentioned blogs which were related to her hobbies, but nobody suggested that they get their information about religion from sources outside the major media houses. Some students mentioned Facebook links, but majority of these led to newspaper websites.6

There are exceptional cases when the ‘new’ media plays a major, autonomous role; these include instances of censorship (Poole and Taira 2013). When the mainstream media is being politically controlled, news spreads via Twitter. Or, when ‘Everybody Draw Mohammed Day’ (20.10.2010) was launched on the social media as a protest against and provocation of what were considered to be attempts to limit freedom of expression, Pakistan blocked Facebook temporarily, but the damage had already been done: many people in Pakistan were already aware of the campaign.

In some cases the news items have their origin in the ‘new’ media; for example YouTube, but usually they become debated issues only after going through the ‘old’ media. It is true that ‘old’ media houses do not have the monopoly in selecting topics for the public agenda. This is partly because of the existence of the internet, but the freesheets have also played a role in this development. However, some commentators go too far in suggesting that the ‘old’ media finds its stories on internet discussion forums (Pietilä 2007: 376). According to my observations, it is not a constant pattern and when it does happen, it is rarely so direct. For example, when the Finnish mainstream media started to focus a critical eye on the Laestadian revival movement’s ways of dealing with cases of paedophilia within its communities, the topic had already been discussed on forums by those who were concerned. However, the media did not pick them up from there. It was rather that the anonymous discussants were empowered enough by the support of like-minded others, and then were able to give stories to the mainstream media in order to start a wider and more visible debate.

The point here is not to suggest that the ‘old’ media have remained the same. On the contrary: the publishing houses that used to be organised around one newspaper are only able to maintain their position by trans-

When compared with September 2007, five most popular are the same, but in a slightly different order: MTV3, Ilta-Sanomat, Iltalehti, YLE and Helsingin Sanomat (see Pietilä 2007: 50).

6 A notable exception to this is the tendency to link the most ridiculous and absurd opinion blogs to Facebook. Some bloggers acquire ‘cult’ status and the ridiculing of them strengthens the normative boundaries of the imagined community of those who disagree.
forming themselves into multimedia organisations in which a printed daily newspaper plays only a small part. Nonetheless, even in the course of this transformation they are maintaining a strong position, along with news agencies, in generating and sharing information about religious affairs.

Traditional newspapers – whether printed or on websites – can be strong as long as they maintain quality, an aura of trustworthiness and provide astute analysis and good filtering in the arena of a chaotic abundance of information about religion. Digital space offers plenty of opinions, talking points, ideas and expertise on specific issues, but, due to its anonymity and lack of an aura of trustworthiness, people are more likely to rely on information when they know its source and are able to evaluate it on the basis of their previous experiences. The ‘old’ media loses out to the ‘new’ in terms of the quantity of stories about religious affairs, but quantity is not enough to create topics for public discussion. Therefore, the mainstream media matters even when the origin of the religion-related story is in the ‘new’ media, because the ‘old’ media are more powerful when it comes to selecting the stories, functioning as a nodal point in distributing them, and working within the aura of trustworthiness and responsibility that they have in the minds of many media users.

**People care about the ‘old’ media’s coverage**

My third observation is simple: the ‘old’ media’s coverage matters to people and communities. If the ‘old’ media does not matter anymore, why are representatives of religious communities so worried about the representations of their beliefs and practices in the ‘old’, mainstream media?

In the United States people ranked religious affairs news as second in terms of importance, but in terms of satisfaction it ranked last. Religious leaders suggested that the media were ‘too sensational and focus on fringe elements in ways that denigrate religion’. Conservative Protestants said that journalists

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7 Even though the anonymity of the web has often been pointed out by critics who see it as part of the ‘cult of the amateur’ (Keen 2007) and ‘an officially endorsed licence for irresponsibility’ (Bauman 2012: 118), it is obvious that ‘new’ media enthusiasts also agree that the web allows greater anonymity than the ‘old’ media – they just happen to value it differently.

8 Insiders of various communities and subcultures do not always trust mainstream media accounts, but for general readers the mainstream media are usually more trustworthy than insiders’ accounts, especially if there are any reasons to think that insiders want to present themselves by sharing only positive aspects.
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tend to promote secular values; they found it hard to believe that there were any Christian journalists (Buddenbaum 1998: 105, 110). This can be applied to other groups as well. As Paul Moses writes, ‘journalists assigned to the religion beat find out very quickly that many of the people they cover suspect the news media are biased against them. Evangelical Christians, Catholics, Jews, and Muslims all complain that they are victims of unfair coverage’ (Moses 2005: 67).

In Britain I had the opportunity to participate in a conference where spokespersons of many religious associations were sharing their thoughts with journalists and academics about religion in the media.9 Most religious people complained about the media coverage and treatment of their group. Therefore, it seems to be the case that however religion is covered in the mainstream media, religious people are not satisfied – and people invest their time and energy in pointing this out.

A good example from the conference was a complaint by Sikhs who thought that their treatment in the media was negative and that they were not covered as extensively as were Muslims in the British media. Furthermore, in some cases they are even being confused with Muslims. It is questionable whether a greater amount of coverage is necessarily a good thing, if the media often focuses on conflict and controversies. Confusing Sikhs with Muslims is unfortunate indeed, but, as far as I know, there is only anecdotal evidence of that happening in the media. Whatever the case, all communities are entitled to expect fair and balanced media coverage. However, according to my researches the image of Sikhs in the British media is far from negative. Sikhs have been involved in one major media controversy in Britain during the past couple of decades. This was in 2004 when the theatrical drama Behzti (Dishonour), written by a British-born woman with a Sikh background, Gurpreet Khaur Bhatti, was protested against by Sikhs in Birmingham (Weller 2009: 155–6). This extended into a media debate which was still in the minds of Sikh representatives at the 2009 conference (see Singh 2012), although most of the daily coverage of Sikhs is fairly positive. Sikhs are seen as an example of a community which has integrated successfully and because of this, the coverage is sometimes verging on treating Sikhs as the ‘teacher’s pet’ of all non-Christian religious and ethnic minorities in Britain.10 The example

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10 My understanding of the media coverage of British Sikhs is closer to the data received from statistics. According to British Census 2001 Sikhs in general have higher
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of Sikhs in Britain shows that organisations and communities pay a lot of attention to the media coverage that is related to them, up to a point of being oversensitive and selective at times.11

One important question asks why do religious groups want to be covered in the mainstream media, if they consider their treatment unfair? Generally religious groups want to be covered because they want to disseminate their message, find allies, attract new members and generally further their interests. Furthermore, the voices as they are heard in the mainstream media coverage give an indication of the state of the internal hierarchy for those on the inside and also communicates this to outsiders, as communities carefully monitor who gets to be the spokesperson for a particular tradition. Moreover, media 'coverage, especially favorable or neutral coverage by an outside entity such as the press, creates an illusion of legitimacy. Being ignored or receiving unfavorable coverage' by the mainstream media has the opposite effect (Buddenbaum 1998: 21). Staying outside the mainstream media is not a real option for most groups.

This situation is not in the control of religious communities. If there is any battle between religion and media, the media are winning (Hoover 2006: 3). And even though the mainstream media are not anti-religious or 'secularist' in their content and approach, nor are they voices speaking on behalf of religious communities. An autonomous media institution was constituted in the institutional differentiation process of modernising societies, and it has been suggested that this process has had three main consequences for the relationship between religious groups and the media. First of all, the media have become an important, if not primary, source of information about religious issues. Secondly, information about religious issues comes to be formed according to the demands of popular media genres. Thirdly, the predominantly secular media 'have taken over many of the cultural and social functions of the institutionalised religions and provide spiritual guidance, moral orientation, ritual passages and a sense of community and belonging' (Hjarvard 2011: 124).

rates of private home ownership than the national average and otherwise they increasingly resemble the national profile. They are not necessarily the 'ethnic high flyers' in Britain, but neither are they 'underachievers' (Bluck et al. 2012: 101–2).

11 One reason why the reception of even fairly positive coverage might result in complaints lies in the gap between media logics and the hopes of religious communities: religious groups would like the media to tell people about their ethical message, whereas the media focus on controversies, celebrities, out-of-the-ordinary events and what they consider to be socially, politically and economically significant topics.
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Most relevant of these for the purpose of this article is the fact that the mass media have the ability to set the public agenda: details given in the coverage of a particular issue prompt people as to what is considered important and what is not. Furthermore, the mass media provides a language to speak about religion, to describe and classify people and groups as liberals and conservatives, for example. Moreover, the power to decide over what parts of religion are worth talking about has been passed over from the church to the media (Buddenbaum 1998: 113; see also Hjarvard 2011: 125). This is why people continue caring about coverage of religion in the ‘old’ media despite all the changes and opportunities brought about by the ‘new’ media.

The ‘new’ media offer plenty of opportunities for marginalized groups to disseminate their message and reach potentially interested people without the mediation of a sometimes unfavourable mainstream media. This is the appeal of the ‘new’ media for many communities. More than this, the ‘new’ media provide favourable circumstances in order 1) to find like-minded others, 2) to hear more heterogeneous voices than the mainstream media have traditionally wanted to listen to and 3) for finding information that is not featured in the mainstream media. These three aspects are highlighted in interviews and correspondence documented in Heidi Campbell’s study on religion and the ‘new’ media (see Campbell 2010: 82, 155, 180), and other scholars have argued for the internet’s role in facilitating more active and visible identities for atheist and secular groups (Smith and Cimino 2012).

While there is evidence of digital communities that are organised so that they allow a multiplicity of voices and opinions (Hoover and Echchaibi 2012), searching for like-minded people and sharing information that is closely related to people’s existing interests are typical features of ‘new’ media networks and communities (Pietilä 2007: 46–7). Therefore, there are new kinds of digital spaces where links are shared and topics evaluated. These spaces – astutely re-named the ‘@gora’ (Bauman 2012: 32) – are significant in locating individuals in hyper-interactive interpretive communities. These are very different contexts for receiving and processing information than the situation in which an individual is reading a newspaper in solitude while having breakfast. However, none of this changes the fact that people worry about how their community is covered in the mainstream media.

It has been suggested in this section that the appeal of the ‘new’ media does not cancel out the power of the mainstream, ‘old’ media, or people’s interest in how they are portrayed in the media. This can be further illustrated by selected examples. The Druid Network has established a strong digital basis for sharing information, organising activities and maintaining Druid identity in
Britain. When they acquired charitable status on the basis of the advancement of religion in England and Wales in 2010, the Daily Mail, the second biggest British newspaper and known for its politically conservative and pro-Christian standpoint, published an article by Melanie Phillips (2010), who wrote ‘will someone please tell me this is all a joke?’ and continued that ‘elevating them to the same status as Christianity is but the latest example of how the bedrock creed of this country is being undermined. More than that, it is an attack upon the very concept of religion itself.’ She concluded that ‘Druidry is surely not a religion but a cult’ (Phillips 2010).

Phillips’s report caused outrage among Druids, leading some outside of the Druid Network to draw up a petition demanding an apology, acquiring 4,187 signatures. The case of the Daily Mail article was an example of the attention marginal groups pay to the media coverage that concerns them. Although the Druid Network had already been granted charitable status on the basis of the advancement of religion, negative coverage in the ‘old’ media prompted a swift response.

Similarly, when a book about Finnish Wiccans received a fairly negative review, in which the seriousness of Wicca was questioned, in one of the main daily newspapers (Wilhelmsson 2005), Wicca adherents sent a response to the newspaper. The letter was never published in the newspaper, but was available on the website of the Finnish Pagan Network (www.pakanaverkko.fi). Even Finnish Pagans who have been pioneers in creating their network by using ‘new’ media (at least if compared to organisations, groups and communities classified as religious) were eager to respond immediately to the ‘old’ media’s coverage, which amounted to nothing more than a book review.

The most important thing to keep in mind in thinking about the persisting significance of the ‘old’ media in relation to religion is this: the ‘old’ media remains a powerful arena of discourse on religion, especially for those who are not actively seeking information on the subject (see Fischer-Nielsen 2012: 48–9; Hjarvard 2012: 30; Poole and Taira 2013). It is obvious that the social

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12 For the petition for a public apology from Melanie Phillips for her article ‘Druids as a religion? Stones of praise here we come,’ see Petitiononline.com 2011. There is a YouTube clip of Arthur Pendragon and others handing in the petition to the Daily Mail offices in London, posted online on 13th November 2010, see Pendragon 2011. About the Druid Network’s Charity Law case, including the analysis of media coverage, see Owen and Taira, forthcoming.

13 The letter has not been available after the launch of a new website. The latest check is from 2008 (22 May), but the link is not in operation anymore. I do not have a copy of the letter, but I have referred to it in one of my earlier articles (Taira 2008: 137–8).
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media, as well as many websites and discussion forums dedicated solely to religion-related issues, are hugely significant for people who are interested in religion and who actively seek information about it, but they are ordinary people who do not mind too much about what goes on in religious communities, or about debates concerning religion get their information from the mainstream newspapers and television. Furthermore, people who are in powerful positions in society are not likely to follow religious media or ‘digital religion’, but they are playing key roles in making decisions that have impact on religious organisations and communities, whether digital or not. This does not mean that everything significant happens in the realm of the ‘old’ media, because there is no such thing as an ‘old’ media in the same way there used to be. However, newspapers, television and radio are not powerless or irrelevant. The ‘old’ media interacts with the ‘new’ and the point is to find out how this interaction works.

The convergence and intertwining of the ‘old’ and ‘new’

News material circulates from one area of the media to another and there is no consistent starting point or source of origin for news. If previously it was the media houses who decided what gets covered in the media, now there is more interaction, because media technologies have made it possible for ordinary people to produce material and distribute it. This chapter has emphasised that in religion-related issues the mainstream media play a significant role, but cannot do so without being in connection with ‘new’ media. Furthermore, the ‘old’ media adapt to the logic of the ‘new’, for example in incorporating video material into news stories (thus contributing to increasing visualization) and in stressing the importance of clicks, comments and ‘likes’ in evaluating the success of news and in integrating consumers to the production process (thus emphasizing co-creation and contributing to the ‘prosumerisation’ of the media). However, the adaptation does not simply mean a decrease in influence, as in some cases it has increased the ‘reachability’ of the ‘old’ media.

14 Prosumer is a portmanteau word combining producer and consumer. The term was popularised by Tapscott and Williams (2008), who referred to the value of openness, peering and sharing in increasing participation in the media.

15 The Guardian provides a good example: its circulation of hard copies is relatively low in comparison to other British newspapers, but it is one of the most popular and influential newspaper websites. Daily newspapers seem to isolate themselves and decrease their online influence if they are available only for those who pay. So far an
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The concept of media convergence, coined by Henry Jenkins, is particularly relevant here; understood as ‘the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences’ (Jenkins 2006: 2). Here I emphasise the first aspect, the flow of content, by introducing and analysing one religion-related media controversy, thus suggesting that studying how different media are intertwined and mingled is one way to go beyond a strict distinction between ‘old’ and ‘new’ media.

On 12 October 2010 the Finnish public broadcasting company YLE broadcast a live studio debate entitled Gay Night (Homoilta) on one of its main television channels. Even though on the surface level the topic was about the rights of gay people in general, soon the debate started to revolve around religion, mainly the attitude of the Evangelical Lutheran Church towards homosexuals and homosexuality. While there were pro-gay religious commentators in the studio, religious, anti-gay voices were louder. During the programme many people resigned from the Church via the internet website. Partly because this resignation boom continued, the programme received plenty of coverage in the newspapers. I explored the media reception of and debate about Gay Night with my students, looking at national newspapers, religious papers and ‘new’ media extensively, but here I shall focus only on the convergence between ‘old’ and ‘new’ media (about the Gay Night, see also Moberg and Sjö 2012: 86–9; Hokka 2013).

The first aspect of this entire media event which is worth highlighting is that it was initiated by television. It was possible to send text messages and emails to the programme, and some of them were read aloud or shown in the screen. The programme itself was an example of interaction between ‘old’ and ‘new’ media, but it also showed the power of television to prompt a reaction.

The second aspect is the increase in resignations from the Church. It happened on a website; it started during the programme and continued while the media debate was active. The fact that it is easy to terminate church membership without delay on a web platform made it possible to keep the news value and intensity of the debate so strong. Without the ‘new’ media, the debate would presumably have been slower-paced, less intense, and there would have been more time for reflection, but as things went, people responded

online paywall has worked for special papers, such as the Financial Times, but less well for those whose target is to reach general readership (given that there are other relevant and free online media available). See Brown 2012: 121.
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quickly by resigning from the Church online. Again, this aspect highlights the convergence of ‘old’ and ‘new’ media.

The third aspect is related to the reception and media discussion. The ‘old’ media covered ‘new’ media outputs by referring to the blog of a celebrity who criticised the Church and also telling the readers that a less famous blogger’s rant against homosexuals had received 37,000 Facebook ‘likes’. According to this case, the mainstream media monitors digital debate and picks up parts of it. Three criteria were present: celebrities were likely to be referred to; unusually popular pieces were mentioned (but not always taken seriously), especially if they circulated in social media; opposite standpoints were juxtaposed in the ‘old’ media, but more radical articulations of these positions were taken from the ‘new’ media.

The fourth aspect deals with inclusion. As the mainstream media is selective and cannot compete at the level of quantity, it is useful to ask, what was being left out by the ‘old’ media? In this case, direct responses to blogs were not mentioned in the mainstream media, although some blogs were monitored. Furthermore, even though radical articulations of opposite positions were picked up, poorly articulated rants – given that they were not social media hits – were not covered.

The fifth aspect notes a long-term convergence and intertwining of the old and new media. Approximately five months after Gay Night the youth section of Christian revival group launched a video on YouTube (and on a religious television channel, TV7) in which former bisexual had recovered from her orientation and become heterosexual. This prompted a media debate and a minor peak in Church membership resignations. Here I will skip the details, but point out the connection to convergence: it started from ‘new’ media; it was seen as a continuation of the Gay Night debate which was located in the ‘old’ media; and it was debated in both the ‘old’ and ‘new’ media.

In spite of having its origins in television, Gay Night was not specifically an ‘old’ media event. Likewise, despite its origins in YouTube, the Christian anti-gay campaign was not ‘new’ media event. The former would not have

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16 I am referring to Jari Tervo’s and Jouko Piho’s blogs respectively. Both blogs are located on the online newspaper Uusi Suomi’s website, which increases the likelihood of them being monitored by the mainstream media.

17 The campaign was organised by youth section of The Lutheran Evangelical Association of Finland, which can be classified – for lack of better terms – as Evangelical and conservative. The name of the campaign ‘Älä alistu!’ was taken from the Bible (Gal. 5:1). In English it says ‘be not entangled’, but better translation of Finnish version in this context would be ‘Do not yield’.

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been such a huge media event without ‘new’ media and the latter would not have caused such a stir without the former. Taken together, both cases (and their connection) function as an example of media convergence.

Conclusion

This exploration has been motivated by the experiences I have had in researching religion in the mainstream media. The starting point was to examine how and why the ‘old’ media matters in the era of digital religion, if at all. Three observations were made: 1) people still use the ‘old’ media, 2) widely distributed news about religion in the ‘new’ media is often based on stories published in the ‘old’ media, and 3) the coverage of religious affairs in the ‘old’ media matters to (religious) people. The first one is fairly obvious and it can be countered by pointing out that there is a decrease in the number of users of ‘old’ media; but it is still useful to remember that a slightly shrinking audience has not meant the end of its significance. The second one is useful in understanding that media houses have a significant presence in the ‘new’ media. The third observation is particularly important, because representatives of religious groups are very sensitive to their coverage in the mainstream media. A key point that binds these together is that especially those who are not keen on following religious issues in detail with the help of specific ‘new’ media outlets get their information about religion from the mainstream media.

These observations do not lead to the conclusion that nothing has changed in the media sphere. However, the current situation makes it unnecessary to maintain the strict distinction between ‘old’ and ‘new’ media, especially when the classification has a normative flavour, suggesting that ‘old’ does not matter much and is not worth studying anymore. This convergence and intertwining of old and new in the media has been demonstrated by the analysis of one religion-related media event. The general argument has arisen out of my interest in studying influential public discourse on religion, and from that perspective the study of ‘new’ media does not appear as revolutionary as, perhaps, it might from other perspectives. This, of course, does not mean that ‘new’ media are not relevant in public discourse, or that the study of them would not be truly revolutionary from selected perspectives, but that is just another way of saying that the significance of ‘new’ media for the study of religion depends on the questions, approaches and perspectives adopted.
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The video *Three Things About Islam*

Islamophobia online or a religious dialogue?

Introduction

The possibility of dialogue online, even in the third decade of the internet, remains a questionable prospect. Some scholars view the internet as a place of democracy, where free speech leads to sincere dialogue (see Campbell 2010). Others see it as a place which, instead of endorsing dialogue, actually promotes the offline social order and creates even more animosity between different groups (Barker 2005, Campbell 2010, Larsson 2007). This paper will explore the option of online dialogue in the media of YouTube.

I will do so by addressing the rather heated issue of Islamophobia, through the case study of a YouTube video titled *Three Things About Islam* (2012b).

The video *Three Things About Islam* was posted on YouTube by a Swedish group called the White Roses in July 2010. The video makes an attempt to be critical and logical, giving evidence from Muslim sources, using intelligent argumentation, and so forth. Two main questions arise from exploring this video: 1) Is the video Islamophobic? That is, what is an acceptable definition of Islamophobia? 2) Does the participatory nature of YouTube allow for a dialogue between the consumers of the video?

In order better to identify Islamophobic ideas, there is a need for a clear definition of Islamophobia. For example, should all criticism of Islam be read as equivalent to Islamophobia? What tools can we offer to distinguish between hate and criticism? Once such a definition is established, an analysis of the video can be produced. In the second part of this paper, special attention will be devoted to the role of media in the message of the video.

The paper will first present the video from a qualitative and quantitative perspective. Then, the definition and features of Islamophobia will be examined and applied on the video. Last, I will look into the reactions to the video, and show how these responses create what I consider a dialogue.
The video

The video *Three Things About Islam* was originally posted in English, and later translated by the group into German, and by other YouTube users into Russian and Spanish. When trying to understand the spread of this phenomenon, or any other YouTube video, Limor Shifman argues that we should observe not only the number of views (‘hits’), but also the mirrors1 and reactions to the video (Shifman 2011). Similarly, Jean Burgess and Joshua Green show that videos on YouTube should be understood to be not only a media product, but also a producer of interactions and reactions (Burgess and Green 2009). When examining this video, I would like to point to the importance of the reactions it has evoked.

The original video has acquired around 2.5 million hits.2 Concerning the proportions of reactions to and mirrors of the video, further and deeper research needs to be done. In my independent research, carried out between the four-month period between September 2011 and December 2011, I tried to distinguish between mirrors, which can be seen as supporting the videos, and reactions which I found to be solely disputing the video. This initial research yields the results presented in the table on the following page.

In *Three Things About Islam* the video makers present to the public information about Islam that they believe most people do not know, and should be aware of. The video’s introduction stages a general claim that every opinion can be counter-attacked, and that most people are aware only of information that fits their existing worldview. In the second part of the video, the White Roses share three claims about Islam that they consider to be ‘surprising information.’ This consists of three statements, which the authors claim to be principles held by Muslims:

1. The Qur’an is different from other holy scriptures; it is to be understood literally and by using the traditional Islamic, exegetical rule that later verses are most authoritative.
2. Striving to institute a worldwide Shari’a law is a religious duty, to which all Muslims must adhere.
3. Muslims are allowed to deceive non-Muslims in order to promote Islam.

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1 ‘Mirror’ is the action of re-posting a video under another account, in order to spread the video to more people.
2 2,448,815 ‘hits’ in the English version and 241,713 in the German version (White Roses 2011b).
The video concludes that there might still be much more about Islam that people do not know, and that one should strive to learn about Islam as soon as possible, or, in their words: ‘this subject will affect you in the near future, take the chance to inform yourself now – before it does’ (Three Things About Islam 2011a).

The video itself contains only text, which is narrated by an off-screen voice. No images other than the text can be seen in the video. However, as the text unrolls, certain words are emphasized and enlarged.

Unlike some opinion videos, where the speaker shows himself and takes responsibility (Condell 2011), the White Roses prefer anonymity. Their YouTube page presents a short description of the group, which changed from a Swedish group in 2010,3 to a European group approximately midway through 2011.4 In their profile, they write the following: ‘The White Roses are located in Europe. We have no religious affiliation and are not members of any political party’ (White Roses 2011a).

The information about the group is limited, and when I tried to contact them, the response was negative. The group wished to stay anonymous and refused to answer any questions, claiming that ‘they do not want any attention drawn to them’ (email correspondence between the group and the author in December 2011).

However, the group’s choice of name is also part of their group identity, and it promotes their motives and way of thinking. The original White Roses was a non-violent resistance student group in Nazi Germany, which was famous for spreading leaflets calling for active opposition to the Nazi regime (White Roses 2011c). By choosing this name, the group associates themselves

3 Last checked on 3.11.2010.
4 The exact date of the change is unknown to me, but as I have been frequently following the group’s activity, it is my estimation that the change was done around June or July 2011.
with an intellectual, non-aggressive group, and so tacitly implies that their arguments are also not hostile. They also draw a parallel between Islam and the Nazi regime, implying the dangers that Islam might hold.

**Islamophobia**

As mentioned previously, in order to understand the Islamophobic – or otherwise – tendencies of the video, an examination of the definition of Islamophobia is needed. Islamophobia as a phenomenon is relatively new and its definition is still somewhat unclear. This question of definition has been a ‘hot topic’ for contemporary researchers of Islam, and a few books have recently been written on the subject (e.g. Abbas 2011, Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008, Sayyid and Vakil 2010). One of the most recurring sources for a definition of Islamophobia is the Runnymede Trust Report *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All* (1997), which offers this simple and clear definition: ‘Islamophobia is a shorthand way to refer to hate or dread of Islam or Muslims’ (Islamophobia 1997: 4). The report also points to seven features of Islamophobia as they are presented by Thair Abbas (2011: 65):

1. Muslim cultures are seen as monolithic.
2. Islamic cultures are substantially different from other cultures.
3. Islam is perceived as implacably threatening.
4. Adherents of Islam use their faith to gain political and military advantage.
5. Muslim criticism of Western cultures and societies is rejected out of hand.
6. The fear of Islam is mixed with racist hostility to immigration.
7. Islamophobia is assumed to be natural and unproblematic.

These definitions have been used by scholars to determine if certain texts or acts are Islamophobic. For example, when Göran Larsson examines the web portal WikiIslam (Larsson 2007), he understands the Runnymede Report to distinguish between ‘closed’ and ‘open’ attitudes toward Islam. A closed attitude sees all Muslims as one group and Islam as a completely hermetic religion. In this view, all Muslims act in the same ways, being guided by a sealed, undisputed religious text, the Qur'an. An open attitude, on the other hand, sees Islam as a complex religion that consists of a variety of traditions and practices. In an open attitude Muslims are treated as individuals. Larsson argues that WikiIslam takes a closed attitude in its understanding of Islam, and so should be seen as an Islamophobic web portal.
If we take these definitions and apply them to the video *Three Things About Islam*, we see that some of the features offered by the Runnymede Report apply to the video. To start with, a closed attitude is apparent in the video. The Qur’an is presented in the video as a book which should be taken literally, and there is no ‘picking and choosing’ (*Three Things About Islam* 2011b). The video also refers to Muslims as one, united, entity; ‘it is the duty of every Muslim to keep striving until all governments have been converted to Shari’a law’ (*Three Things About Islam* 2011b, in boldface in the original). According to the video makers, all Muslims understand the Qur’an in the same way, since there is only one way to comprehend it, and all Muslims act precisely according to the Qur’an.

Other aspects of Islamophobia formulated by the Runnymede report can be found in the video. For example, Islam is inclined to be a threat, as can be seen in the group’s choice of name and in their video. The video asserts the unsubstantiated claim that the Qur’an commends the elimination of ‘man made governments (such as democracy)’ (*Three Things About Islam* 2011b). When claiming that Islam’s goal is to establish Shari’a law worldwide and destroy all other governments, the video takes an Islamophobic stand that views Islam as entirely political and as a threat to Western governments.

Another Islamophobic feature in the video is the attempt to separate Islam from other religions by differentiating between the Qur’an and ‘other religious books (such as the Bible or the Torah)’ (*Three Things About Islam* 2011b). According to the video, the Qur’an, unlike other holy scriptures, is not symbolic and should be read literally.

According to the contemporary definitions of Islamophobia, certain features in the video correspond with the definition of Islamophobia. When the video’s content is analysed as a text, it seems completely Islamophobic. But the video is not a text; rather it is a video which is posted on the unique medium of YouTube. Could the specific medium change the message?

**Media**

As was famously phrased by Marshall McLuhan, ‘the medium is the message’ (McLuhan 1964) and since this video exists in the virtual world of YouTube, it is important to try and understand how the medium influences the message in this case.

YouTube is a web portal that combines video content with the opportunity to participate. According to Burgess and Green (2009), YouTube is mainly
a space of participatory culture. YouTube is based solely (or mostly) on the participation of its users, and the company itself does not provide any content for the site. This makes YouTube a unique media tool, where each user is both the contributor and the consumer. For this reason YouTube can also be described as a community, or a market place, where different opinions, languages and needs are all shared in the same space. Burgess and Green emphasise that ‘all contributors of content to YouTube are potential participants in a common space; one that supports a diverse range of uses and motivations’ (Burgess and Green 2009: 57). This participation is created by posting videos as well as by reacting to existing videos. There are three main forms of response:

1. Sharing the video, or spreading it, by making a ‘mirror’, that is, re-posting the video without changing its content, solely for the purpose of spreading it.
2. Commenting in the video’s comment section.
3. Making a video which imitates, explains or in any other way responds to the original video.

As seen previously in this article, the video Three Things About Islam has received all of the above-mentioned responses. First, other YouTube users have shared and spread the video. As of December 2011, 40 users have mirrored the video, adding about 4,762 views. Second, the comment section of the video is surprisingly active, even two years after the video was posted. As of April 2012, there were 44,507 comments to the English version of the video, and 59,510 to the German one (Three Things About Islam 2012a). The comments vary from loud support to harsh opposition and anything in between. Some of the comments are superficial, offensive or nonsensical. Others enter into discussions: either theological, citing the Qur’an and other Islamic sources, or political, referring to political or historical events. The sheer mass of the comments makes them difficult to analyse. However, a few notes can be made: 1) although the video was posted more than two years ago, the comment section is still relatively lively. Comments are constantly being added, with an estimated average of about 70 comments per day. 2) Within the comments certain dialogues are created between two (or more) specific users. For example, the user named ‘ingehs’ (2012) has been going back and forth answering people’s questions about Islam and debating ‘hot’ issues. And third, video reactions to Three Things About Islam have been made by sixteen people. These video responses tend to use the same methodology and style as the Three
Things About Islam video, creating what might be considered a dialogue. For example, in a video-blog (vlog) reaction to Three Things About Islam, Three Things You Didn’t Know About Islam (2012), the user describes his feelings on watching the video, and then analyses it claim by claim, pointing to what he thinks are missing data, misused information, or sheer error. An even stronger example is the case of videos which completely imitate Three Things About Islam. These are videos made entirely of text which is sometimes narrated by a voice, just like the original. All of these videos are critical of the original video. By using Islamic sources or analytical claims, these videos try to refute the video. One example is the video 3 Things About Islam (2012), which imitates the original video in all aspects, but with a different message. This video makes similar visual (fonts and sizes of the text) and audio (narration by a man, similar music track) choices. However, already in the first minute the video makes a stand against the original video, by writing ‘three things about Islam’ and then adding ‘they would have you believed [sic]’. Thus it creates a full sentence: ‘three things they would have believed about Islam’ (3 Things about Islam 2012: 0:05).

It could be argued that a dialogue is created between the responses and the original video. Hence, although the video Three Things About Islam is in itself Islamophobic, the fact that it was posted in the media of the internet means that it might become part of a dialogue.

This statement demands an underlying assumption that should be questioned, which is: does participation culture create a dialogue?

When looking at this particular case, both the liveliness of the comments and the language and style choices of the video responses stand as possible evidence for a dialogue. The fact that the video responses make their arguments using the same style and method of argumentation (e.g. logic and Qur’anic sources) is important in order to stage a dialogue. Another evidence for this plausible dialogue is in the comment section. Not only is the comment section still active, it seems that the arguments within the comment section are ongoing between recurring users. The same users return to debate the video daily, which strengthens the claim that these users are in an ongoing dialogue with the video.

As a more general assumption, the question of the possibility of dialogue on the internet is highly important for research in the field. Although scholarly opinions differ in their answers to this question, one interesting theory to consider is Walter Ong’s ‘second orality’ (Ong 1982). According to Ong, oral culture is different from literate culture in many ways (Ong 1982: 2). One of these differences is that in orality communication becomes an ongoing event,
while in scripture the words and ideas become constant, unmoving and impossible to argue with, which makes them seemingly more objective. After all, one cannot argue with a book (or, to be precise, one can argue with a book, but regrettably the book does not change its mind). In the new media, Ong claims, a return to orality occurs. Well before the establishment of the world wide web, Ong observed the notion of orality in radio, the cinema and the television: the media of the twentieth century (Ong 1982: 135). This return to orality, I argue, is even more powerful online, since participation is promoted. On the internet, and specifically on YouTube, one could argue with a book, and indeed one does so.

Two conclusions arise from this paper – first, the video Three Things About Islam can and should be considered Islamophobic. The ideology behind it seems to support the notion of Islam as a threat and its presentation of Islam is closed-minded and tends to generalize. Second, in this case the participatory culture of the media in which the video was presented, YouTube, created a dialogue between anti-Islamists and supporters of Islam. This dialogue, like many dialogues, might not change the opinions of either side, but the mere fact that the online sphere embraces and promotes religious dialogue is an important phenomenon. This phenomenon still needs to be more substantially researched, but the optimist in me hopes that we are looking at a powerful tool that might promote religious tolerance.

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Biographical notes

Minja Blom is a doctoral student in the study of religion at the University of Helsinki. In her dissertation she is studying the fandom of vampire television shows as a part of the religious meaning-making of fans. Fields of interest are popular culture, fandom, and films as a part modern religiosity. Her article ‘Uhrista taistelijaksi. Buffy vampyyrintappaja ja elokuvien väkivaltaiset naiset sankarimyytteinä’ was published in Elokuvan uskonnollinen peilinä edited by Heikki Pesonen et al. (University of Helsinki 2011). Email: minja.blom@helsinki.fi.

Claire Clivaz is Assistant Professor in New Testament and Early Christian Literature at the University of Lausanne (Switzerland). Her field of research comprises the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament and the Digital Humanities. After a book on a famous variant in the Gospel According to Luke (Lange et la sueur de sang (Lc 22:43–44), Peeters, 2010), she edited several collections of essays, including the first DH essay collection in Switzerland (Reading Tomorrow: from Ancient Manuscripts to the Digital Era, PPUR 2012). In 2010 with a team of colleagues she initiated DH in her country, where three DH study groups are now running (www.unil.ch/digitalera; dhlausanne.ch). She will be the co-chair at the international DH 2014 meeting in Lausanne. Email: claire.clivaz@unil.ch.

Yoel Cohen is Associate Professor, School of Communication, Ariel University Center, Israel (School Chairman 2009–11). His research interests include media and religion in Israel and Judaism, religion and news, foreign news-reporting, defence and the media. He completed a doctorate at City University London. His book publications include God, Jews and the Media: Religion and Israel’s Media (Routledge 2012), Whistleblowers and the Bomb: Vanunu, Israel and Nuclear Secrecy (Pluto 2005), The Whistleblower of Dimona: Vanunu, Israel & the Bomb (Holmes & Meier 2003), Media Diplomacy: the Foreign Office in the Mass Communications Age (Frank Cass 1986). His research has appeared in the Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics; Gazette; Journal of Media and Religion; Israel Affairs; Review of International Affairs; Encyclopaedia of Religion; Communication & Media. He was editor, Israel Media, Encyclopaedia Judaica. Email: yrscohen@netvision.net.il.
Biographical notes

Niklas Foxeus is a senior lecturer and researcher at Stockholm University. He received his PhD in history of religions from Stockholm University, Department of History of Religions, with a dissertation entitled, ‘The Buddhist World Emperor’s Mission: Millenarian Buddhism in Postcolonial Burma’. It was based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Burma/Myanmar and deals with so-called royal esoteric congregations that emerged in the early postcolonial period. His research covers religion and politics, nationalism, popular Buddhism, and especially the construction of diverse forms of Theravāda Buddhism in response to colonialism, the postcolonial condition, modernity, and globalization. He is currently working on a research project on ‘prosperity Buddhism’ in Burma/Myanmar, funded by the Swedish Research Council. Email: niklas.foxeus@gmail.com.

Jenni Hokka is a PhD candidate in the School of Communication, Media and Theatre at the University of Tampere. At the moment she is working as a researcher in the research project ‘Covering Religion: Challenge of Globalization in the Finnish Newspapers’ that focuses on the ways that newspapers have participated in public discussions about religions. She is also finalizing her thesis about the construction of belonging in Finnish television series. Her fields of interests include performative practices, belonging and identities, as well as media history. Email: jenni.hokka@uta.fi.

Dr Isabelle Jonveaux, currently a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Graz (Austria), is working on monasticism in modern European society, especially with regard to the question of asceticism, as well as the internet and relationships between the world and the monasteries. In 2009 she completed a PhD thesis on the comparative economics of contemporary monasteries in Europe at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales de Paris and Università degli Studi di Trento. It was published in 2011 under the title Le monastère au travail: Le Royaume de Dieu au défi de l’économie (Paris: Bayard). Email: isabelle.jonveaux@uni-graz.at.

MA Henna Jousmäki is completing her PhD on the discursive and multimodal construction of ‘Christian metal’ in the Department of Languages at the University of Jyväskylä. Her interests include the sociolinguistics of globalization; subcultural discourse; and language, religion and the media. Her work has been published for example in the Journal of Multicultural Discourses and Discourse, Context and Media. Email: henna.jousmaki@jyu.fi.
Biographical notes

Christiane Königstedt holds an MA degree in Religious Studies and Sociology from the University of Göttingen and works currently on her PhD as a funded member of the research training group ‘Religious Nonconformity and Cultural Dynamics’ at the University of Leipzig (Germany). Her main fields of interest are, beyond modern alternative forms of religion and spirituality (respective beliefs, practices and social manifestations), the different ways alternative religion(s) relate to secular environments from the individual up to the institutional level. At the moment, she is writing her PhD on the reactions towards new religious movements in France with a focus on the legal sources, political and cultural settings. Email: c.koenigstedt@uni-leipzig.de.

MA Nina Maskulin is a doctoral student at the University of Helsinki. Her fields of interest are popular culture and the media, apocalyptic narration, audience studies and ethnography, youth studies, film studies, performing arts studies and semiotics. Email: nina.maskulin@helsinki.fi.

Alexander Darius Ornella is Lecturer in Religion at the University of Hull in the UK. He has received his doctorate in theology from the University of Graz, Austria. As member and project coordinator of the international and interdisciplinary research project ‘Commun(icat)ing Bodies’ which is based at the University of Graz and funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), he is studying the relationships between the body, religion, media, and communication technology. Together with Stefanie Knauss he is the co-editor of Fascinatingly Disturbing: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Michael Haneke’s Cinema (Pickwick 2010). Email: alexander@ornella.info.

Jørgen Podemann Sørensen is Associate Professor in the History of Religions at the University of Copenhagen, Department of Cross-cultural and Regional Studies. His research interests are, among others: ancient religions, especially ancient Egyptian religion and the Hermetic and Gnostic currents of Late Antiquity and the comparative study of ritual. His recent publications include ‘Divination’ published in Janua Religionum 6 (København: BoD, 2010); ‘Ritual texts: language and action in ritual’ in Understanding Religious Ritual, ed. John P. Hoffmann (London: Routledge, 2011) and ‘The secret hymn in hermetic texts’ in Mystery and Secrecy in the Nag Hammadi Collection and other Ancient Literature: Ideas and Practices, ed. C. Bull, L. I. Lied and J. D. Turner (Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 76, Leiden: Brill, 2012). Email: podeemann@hum.ku.dk.
MA Dominik Schlosser is a doctoral student at the Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies at the University of Erfurt, Germany. He is currently writing his dissertation, focussing on the understanding of Islam of the European Muslim intellectual and Jewish convert to Islam Leopold Weiss (Muhammad Asad, 1900–92). His main areas of interest lie within the field of Islamic Studies. Email: dominikschlosser@hotmail.com.

Dr Teemu Taira holds a research fellowship from the Academy of Finland at the Department of Comparative Religion, University of Turku, Finland. His recent research has focused on three areas: religion and the secular in the British and Finnish media, the new visibility of atheism, and the category of ‘religion’ in public life. For a list of publications, visit <http://teemutaira.wordpress.com>. Email: teetai@utu.fi.

Ruth Tsuria, MA in Arts, University of Copenhagen, is an independent scholar working on new media and religion, focusing on the possibilities for human interaction that the internet offers. She is hoping to understand how this new technology will impact the way we think, communicate and ‘do’ religion. This is her first publication. Email: ruthless20@gmail.com.