

## When Religion Meets the Internet: Cyberreligion and the Secularization Thesis

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**Abstract:** This article examines the presence of cyberreligion, the worldwide increasing use of the internet for religious purposes, in which religion is migrating online as its strategies of adaptation and shaping a new environment. It aims to look at the phenomenon of religious migration to virtual world its possible implications for secularization thesis. The internet is a tool that serves the needs of religious communities, rather subvert their existence and development. The migration of religion to cyberworld has proved that religion not only survives in the face of modernization but also constantly transforms itself and becomes increasingly adaptive, hybrid and reflexive in a new environment. The article argues that the massive emergence of online religion serves a (another) counterpoint to the prediction of the end of religion in modern society as proposed by the proponents of secularization theory. It also claims that religious use of the internet among religion surfers has no significant impacts on the real world organized religions and their religious communal identity.

**Keywords:** Religion, the Internet, Secularization, Cyberreligion

### Introduction

The phenomenon of religious presence on the internet attracted for the first time the attention of global societies after *Time* reported a special issue on this in its December 1996 edition. An article, “Finding God on the Web”, pointed out that “(the web) is a vast cathedral of the mind, a place where ideas about God and religion can resonate, where faith can be shaped and defined by a collective spirit” (Chama 1996). The article highlighted the emergence of the internet usage for religious purposes in the 1990s. It described the increasing numbers of religious groups, from traditional religions such as Catholicism to ancient religions like Zoroastrianism, that “migrate online”, as Ess, *et al.* (2007) call, and created their own websites such as [www.ecunet.org](http://www.ecunet.org), [www.h-net.org/~judaic/](http://www.h-net.org/~judaic/), [www.buddhanet.net](http://www.buddhanet.net), [www.godweb.org](http://www.godweb.org), [www.crosswalk.com](http://www.crosswalk.com), and [www.gospelcom.net](http://www.gospelcom.net) (Campbell 2006:4). This phenomenon attracted attention of many people from journalists to university researchers. Since the middle of 1990s, many studies on religion and the computer-mediated communication have been conducted. The pioneering academic studies on the religious use of the internet include the works of O’Leary (1996) “Cyberspace as Sacred Place” and O’Leary and Brasher (1996) “The Unknown God of the Internet” (Campbell 2007:1043).

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This was echoed by surveys undertaken by the Pew Internet and American Life Project. In 2000, findings showed that 21% of internet users or about 20 million people went online to seek spiritual and religious information. This meant that everyday more than 2 million people used the internet for religious purposes (Larsen 2000). One year later, the percentage of religion surfers increased to 25%, about 28 million people, or more than 3 million people a day. This indicated that there were more people who went online for seeking religious and spiritual information than those who connected to the internet for online gambling, auction, stock trading, banking, and dating (Larsen 2001). In 2004, the proportion of religion surfers raised nearly three times; 64% of 128 million internet users in the United States, or nearly 82 million people, used the internet for religious and spiritual matters such as sending or receiving email and greeting cards with religious content, seeking information about how to attend religious services and religious holidays (Hoover, Clark and Rainie 2004). A recent survey reports that almost half of American users use the internet for religious and spiritual purposes including visiting the website of church or other places of worship, reading religion-oriented articles and joining religion-oriented discussions. It also finds that it is common among the young to use the internet for religious purposes in that fifty-seven percent of online Americans under age 35 use the internet for these purposes (Grey Matter Research 2012).

How are we to explain the increasing religious use of the internet in an age that many have called postmodern? This article examines this remarkable presence of cyberreligion, in which religion is migrating online as its strategies of adaptation and shaping a new environment. It aims to look at the phenomenon of religious migration to virtual world its possible implications for secularization thesis. In doing so, this article begins with a discussion on the secularization thesis that posits that the scientific development and modernization process would bring about the demise of religion and spirituality in modern societies. It continues with a description of the religious use of the internet, from the early forms to recent forms of cyberreligion. Then, it closes with some reflections on spiritual shaping of the internet and re-examination of secularization thesis in the light of cyberreligion phenomenon. The article argues that the massive emergence of online religion serves as a (another) counterpoint to the prediction of the end of religion in modern society as proposed by the proponents of secularization theory. It also claims that religious use of the internet among religion surfers has no significant impacts on the real world organized religions and their religious communal identity.

### **Secularization Thesis: the End of Religion in Modern Societies**

In the nineteenth century, theorists such as Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Ferdinand Tonnies, Max Weber and Karl Marx, whose influential ideas continue to shape today social sciences, came to a conclusion that “religion was a declining force in the world” (Shupe 1990 in Fox 2001:54). They argued that being stimulated by modernization force, religion would become less important factor in human life of modern society and a modern secular system would be a dominant force as theological system was falling down. Furthermore, according to these scholars, religion would eventually vanish from the lives of modern secular society (Shupe 1990 in Fox 2001:55).

These ideas refer to what so-called “secularization theory”. The basis of this theory is rooted in the Age of Enlightenment. Voltaire in the eighteenth century remarked that “an age of enlightenment would replace superstition and authoritarian religious order” (Appleby 1994 in Fox 2001:54). In addition, as Liftin (2000 in Fox

2001:54) argued, being unsatisfied by religious and theocratic explanations, early social scientists developed basis for a tradition of rational explanations of human behaviour.

According to Berger (1999:2), the core idea of secularization theory is simple: “Modernization necessarily leads to a decline of religion, both in society and the minds of individuals”. The death of religion has been predicted by social scientists and Western intellectuals since three centuries ago (Stark 1999). It was Thomas Woolston in 1710 who first predicted that modernity would triumph over faith and Christianity would come to an end by 1900 (Stark 1999:249). Another prophet of secularization, Auguste Comte, also predicted the death of religion and religion would be replaced by the science of sociology, but he did not announce when it would happen. He pointed out that “as a result of modernization, human society was outgrowing ‘theological stage’ of social evolution and a new age was dawning in which the science of sociology would replace religion as the basis for moral judgments” (Stark 1999:250).

In the early of the twentieth century, social scientists echoed this secularization theory. A.C. Crawley (Stark 1999:250) remarked that “the opinion is everywhere gaining ground that religion is a mere survival from a primitive... age, and its extinction only a matter of time”. Max Weber asserted that modernization would result in the “disenchantment” of the world and Sigmund Freud convinced his students that religion was the “greatest of all neurotic illusions” that “would die upon the therapist’s couch” (Stark 1999:250).

In the 1950s and 1960s, social scientists believed that the end of religion was underway and ongoing. Political scientists shared a common belief that “modernization would reduce the political significance of primordial phenomena such as ethnicity and religion” (Fox 2001:55). The distinguished anthropologist Anthony Wallace argued that “evolutionary future of religion is extinction” and “it already was well underway in the advanced nations” (Stark 1999:250). Then, Peter Berger in 1968, who then withdrew his support for secularization theory in the 1990s (Berger 1999) as will be seen below, was convinced to say that “by the 21<sup>st</sup> century, religious believers are likely to be found only in a small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture” (Stark 1999:250).

According to Stark (1999:251-253), the prophecies of death of religion in secularization thesis suggest the following five things. First, it is commonly believed that “modernization is causal engine dragging the gods into retirement”. Secularization thesis has a strong connection with modernization theory; the increase of industrialization, urbanization and rationalization would bring about the decrease of religious faith. Second, secularization theory not only predicted the end of religion in terms of religious institution as expressed in the separation of church and state and the decline of authority of religious leaders, but also in the sphere of individual piety and religiousness. As Thomas Jefferson announced, the Christian beliefs, such as the belief in divinity of Jesus, would be regarded by the individuals in modern society as implausible. Third, it is explicit that science has influenced mostly the death of religion in modern secular society. Comte said that science would free people from “the superstitious fetters of faith”. Fourth, secularization is unstoppable social force; once achieved, it is irreversible as it is absorbing state. Fifth and finally, there is a belief among proponents of secularization that secularization process not only applies to Christianity or Christendom, but also to other world religion and global world. It is not only belief in the Christ is “doomed to die out” but also “belief in supernatural powers” in general.

### **Early Forms of Religious Presence on the Internet**

Historically, the presence of religion on the internet began in the early 1980s after the development of modem program in the 1970s. Before the popularity of the internet, religious discourses appeared for the first time on Origins, one of the earliest public bulletin board systems (BBS). Users were so diverse, in terms of religious beliefs and practices, and they involved in a wide variety of spiritual and religious discussions. Then, religious discussions also became an important part of Usenet. On this new network, discussions were classified by topic and put into sections known as newsgroups (Rheingold 1985 and 1993 in Helland 2007:958).

The discussion on religion was actually problematic as some members of Usenet complained about the large number of religious talks on the network. This brought about the idea of establishment of separate discussion area for religion. In spite of opposition from some members, in 1983 Usenet established “net.religion” especially for religious forum. Users began posting to this religious newsgroup, which had around 100 posts at the end of February 1983 (Helland 2007:959).

The forum of “net.religion” was not really a religious environment. It could be regarded as an open forum where users presented their personal beliefs, used them to criticize other’s beliefs and defended them against criticisms. Members could post what they liked with unrestricted freedom of expression as there was no moderator who might regulate discussions. Most of debate on the forum dealt with Christianity ranging from interpretations of scriptures to miracles (Helland 2007:960).

Since the diversity of religious background among early users, the Usenet “net.religion” was filled with strong disagreement and tension concerning various religious beliefs and practices. This resulted in a need to build a separate section for certain religious tradition. It was the Jewish members who initially felt that they needed a separate religious newsgroup. In 1984, a forum named “net.religion.jewish” was developed especially for discussion on Jewish traditions (Helland 2007:961). The need to establish a separate forum for particular religion was also felt by other users with different religious backgrounds. This was followed by establishment of “net.religion.christian” for discussions on Christianity at the same year, and “net.nlang.india” for discussions on Hinduism and Indian culture in 1985. Demanding for a separate area for a particular religion could be regarded as arguing for personal and collective identity of the users. They wanted a place where they were safe to be Jewish, Christians, or Hindu, and talked about their own traditions, rules and regulations without criticisms and aggression from users with different religious backgrounds (Helland 2007:962). By the mid-1980s, the Usenet “net.religion” attracted almost three hundred active religious discussion groups with tens of thousands of postings each year (Helland 2007:963).

### **Recent Forms of Cyberreligion**

Since the development of the World Wide Web, religious presence on the internet has expanded even further. It is obvious that religion continues to be a significant component of cyberspace. A number of early studies reveal interesting results concerning the presence of religion on the internet. In 1996, the Time Warner Company study estimated that “there were three times as many sites concerning God and spirituality than there were concerning sex” (<http://www.time.com/time/godcom/>, in Helland 2007:957). A survey by Pew Internet and American Life Project in 2000 found that “21% of the internet users in the United States went online to undertake some forms of religious activity”; it meant two million people used the internet for

religious purposes a day. This figure revealed that “more people were using the internet for religion and spiritual purposes than were using the medium for online banking and online dating services” (Larsen 2000 in Helland 2007:957). One year later, in 2001, the percentage increased to 25% of internet users, which meant that over three million people a day (Larsen 2001). The number continually increased in the recent years that in 2004, “64% of wired Americans have used the internet for spiritual or religious purposes” (Hoover, Clark and Rainie 2004).

The presence of religion on the internet is an extensive phenomenon as can be seen in the core categories applied by search engines. The category of Religion and Spirituality constitutes the second largest subsection category of the Society group on the World Wide Web. As listed on the Google DMOZ Open Directory Project in 2006, the Religion and Spirituality section had more sites than the entire Science group, around 109,760 websites and 106,749 websites respectively (Helland 2007: 958). My recent simple investigation also revealed the same dominant representation of religious traditions on the web. On Google search engine, the keyword “Islam” yielded about 509,000,000 results; about 98,200,000 results for “Christianity”; about 32,500,000 results for “Judaism”; about 19,600,000 results for “Hinduism”; about 46,200,000 results for “Buddhism”; about 404,000 results for “Neopaganism”; and about 6,680,000 results for “New Religious Movements”.<sup>2</sup> My search using Yahoo search engine also demonstrated the huge number of results of religious presence on the World Wide Web: 14,700,000 results for the keyword “Islam”; 13,600,000 results for “Christianity”; 8,160,000 results for “Hinduism”; 11,500,000 results for “Buddhism”; 9,390,000 results for “Judaism”; 373,000 results for “Neopaganism”; and 12,200,000 results for “New Religious Movements”.<sup>3</sup>

All this demonstrates that religion has become a common aspect of computer and internet-mediated communication. The presence of religion is abundant on the newsgroups, chat rooms and the World Wide Web. The religious use of the internet is extensive as seen in the above hits of search engines. Major world’s religions as well as minority religions have embraced the internet as a medium for their presence in cyberspace.

### *Religion-Online and Online-Religion*

With the development of the World Wide Web, religious websites flourish and proliferate very significantly. The access to the World Wide Web has benefited from the development of browsers such as Internet Explorer, Netscape, Mozilla Firefox and Google Chrome. Individuals and religious organizations have gone online and established their own websites. It is not surprising that cyberspace has begun to be an overcrowded city, which is heavily populated and well-travelled (Helland 2007:964). However, different religious organizations use the internet in different ways. Because of this, religious participation in cyberspace can be classified into two categories: religion-online and online-religion (Helland 2002:294).

In the first category, religion-online, websites are created to present religion in such a way in which vertical control is preserved and traditional authority is maintained. Information on religious doctrine, dogmas and organizations is communicated in a one-to-many fashion. There is no space for the users to involve in discussions and contribute their personal beliefs and opinions into the website. The officials of official religious websites designate and supervise the environment. The

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<sup>2</sup> Online investigation, 3 August 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Online investigation, 3 August 2016.

information presented on religion-online is controlled by official religious organizations by using a form of one-way communication. This kind of religion-online is normally established by official religions, which can be defined as “a set of beliefs and practices prescribed, regulated, and socialized by organized, specifically religious groups” (McGuire 1997 in Helland 2000:295). Examples of this category are [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va), [www.scientology.org](http://www.scientology.org) and [www.lds.org](http://www.lds.org) (Christianity); [www.dalailama.com](http://www.dalailama.com) (Buddhism of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama); <https://www.theismaili.org> (Shi’i Islam); and [www.bahai.org](http://www.bahai.org) (The Baha’i Faith).

A study by Pew Internet and American Life Project found that official church websites “are much more likely to use the web for one-way communication features such as posting sermons and basic information than they are to have two-way communications features or interactive features such as spiritual discussions, online prayer, or fundraising”. The study reveals that 96% of official religious websites surveyed (1309 websites) did not host discussion forums; and only 4% of them (52 websites) provided users with dialogue areas (Larsen 2000 cited Helland 2002:295).

Instead of doing religion online, those who log on official religious websites are channelled to official information about a particular belief system and practice. This controlled interaction may be disadvantageous for religious organizations as people use the internet not only a tool for seeking certain religious information, but also as an environment where they can express their personal beliefs, discuss their religious experiences, and do religion online (Markham 1998 and Larsen 2000 cited in Helland 2000:296).

It appears that religion-online is established by religious groups based on hierarchical religious organization. In the view of creators of religion-online, the internet is a medium to continue their institutional control and structure online and a tool to transmit their messages, not as environment for discussing religious beliefs and practices. As Helland says, they actually breached two main rules of the internet: providing external links to other websites and allowing many-to-many communication or open exchange information (Helland 2007:965).

Different from religion-online, the second category of religious presence on the internet, online-religion, refers to websites whose designers and users perceive the internet and the World Wide Web not only as a medium, but also as an environment for expressing religious views and doing religion online. Generally, online-religion is developed by the unofficial religious groups or individuals who want to create a place where online surfers can discuss their religious views, share their spiritual experiences, pray together through the medium of the internet (Helland 2000:298).

Online-religion may take form in the following three categories of websites (Helland 2000:298). First, unofficial religious websites that are established by unofficial religion, which refers to “a set of religious and quasi-religious beliefs and practices that is not accepted, recognized, or controlled by official religious groups” (McGuire 1997 in Helland 2000:295-298). In the Catholic tradition, examples of this are [www.catholic.org](http://www.catholic.org) and [www.partenia.com](http://www.partenia.com). They provide the web surfers with links to other nonofficial religious websites and even heterodox ones and a variety of religious beliefs and expressions. Second, websites created by new religious movements such as New Age, Neopaganism/Technopagan groups, occult/magical groups, Wicca, and Transhuman. In these websites, surfers are exposed to a variety of services ranging from discussion forums, chat rooms, and study groups to online prayer and virtual ritual. The examples of this kind of website include [www.thepaganweb.com](http://www.thepaganweb.com), [www.thedance.com](http://www.thedance.com), and [www.notelrac.com](http://www.notelrac.com). Third, online-religion may occur on commercial websites, which are developed specifically for

religious and spiritual interaction outside traditional religious structure and hierarchical organization. These websites are characterized as non-denominational, open for unrestrained religious discussion through chat rooms and bulletin board system, and channelled to other links that provide religion surfers with online-prayer and healing rituals. Examples of this kind of websites are [www.beliefnet.com](http://www.beliefnet.com), which is a more traditional religious website, [www.spiritweb.com](http://www.spiritweb.com), which is considered a new age website, [www.withcvox.com](http://www.withcvox.com), and [www.technoetic.com](http://www.technoetic.com), and a number of chat rooms hosted by Yahoo.

### *Online Prayer*

Religious use of the internet can be seen in the form of online ritual. This manifests, among others, in the activity of online prayer. A religious group makes use of the virtual reality to support the prayer group. Ralph Schroeder (as cited Soukup 2002:24) describes:

There are now several Internet-based virtual reality (VR) systems in which many users can interact with each other via text windows in a three-dimensional computer-generated world. In these virtual worlds, users take the shape of avatars that can move around while maintaining a first-person perspective on the world. The avatars have a human-like appearance...

Online prayer resembles the characteristics of face-to-face prayer in which leaders and participant take traditional roles in real world prayer. As Schroeder (as cited in Soukup 2002:25) depicts, participants of online prayer “feel that they are co-present, they do coordinate their voices and gestures... and they also focus their attention to the object of their worship”.

### *Virtual Pilgrimage*

Through cyberspace, users can travel to visit sacred places or attend religious festivals. They can become virtual tourists visiting sacred events occurring thousands of kilometres away from their real world homes. This type of online religious activity is known as virtual pilgrimage, which began to become popular among religion surfers in the late 1990s (Helland 2007:968). People in diaspora can participate in religious festivals that are broadcast online and live, such as the online broadcasting of the Kumbha Mela festival in 2001, which was provided for Indian people who live in the UK and North America (Beckerlegge 2001 in Helland 2007:968). Virtual pilgrimages provide people with opportunity to visit a sacred place that they could never experience in real life. Through virtual reality, religion surfers can travel to Mecca and Medina to make the hajj, walk inside the Vatican to see a sacred chapel, or visit sacred places that no longer exist like the Second Temple at Jerusalem (Helland 2007:968).

Visiting a sacred site online can be advantageous for users such as they can save money and avoid competition with others for hotel rooms. But, it has disadvantages as online pilgrims may experience disconnection with a religious event or a sacred site that is being watched on the computer screen. As Mark McWilliams (2004 in Helland 2007:968) says, virtual pilgrimages are inherently different from real life pilgrimages.

Virtual pilgrimage is not the same as ‘the real thing’. First, it is almost instantaneous – travel to the site is a click of the button away. Second, it takes place figuratively, not literally. The arduous journeys to the distant place, the

ascetic practices that are so important in penitential pilgrimages, do not exist virtually.

Realizing the possible limitations of virtual pilgrimage, creators of virtual pilgrimage have developed the medium to the point where “a stronger connection can occur between the virtual traveller and the sacred place”. In the Christian tradition, the virtual pilgrimage offered by the Lourdes official website ([www.lourdes-france.org](http://www.lourdes-france.org)) is the example of this. This website offers virtual pilgrims with images, recordings, 3D representations, and real time 24/7 live video to experience all aspects of pilgrimage. In order to experience a connection to the real site, the virtual pilgrim can also submit a prayer “that will be placed within the grotto and read during a special service”. Pilgrims to the virtual Lourdes will also receive an email from the host certifying their visit to the sacred site (Helland 2007:969). Similarly, religion surfers can log on Jewish websites such as [www.aish.com](http://www.aish.com) and [www.virtual-jerusalem.com](http://www.virtual-jerusalem.com), and place their prayer on the Western Wall of the Second Temple at Jerusalem, and connect themselves with the sacred sites in a manner that is different from what is traditionally observed (Helland 2007:969; Campbell 2006:5).

### *Cyberchurch and Cybertemple*

Another manifestation of cyberreligion is the emergence of cyberchurches and cybertemples. These are websites created to present the traditional churches and temples online using the images and languages of traditional religious buildings. They are an environment where religion surfers can recreate some aspects of offline churches and temples online. These cyberchurches and cybertemples provide religion surfers with emails of daily religious reading, audio/video sermons, and bulletin boards services for posting religious questions and prayer requests (Campbell 2006:5). Within Jewish tradition, Brasher (2001 in Campbell 2006:5) mentions the emergence of cyberseder, namely “an online celebration of Passover that helps Jewish people re-engage with their faith in the privacy of their own homes”.

Cyberchurch, or E-Church as Schroeder, *et al.* (1998) call, represents the manifestation of religion-online for it is created in a way to resemble the structure of offline church. It contains images of a church, a large cross, various other building and suburban landscape. In addition, cyberchurch is formally structured. The services are offered weekly in a fixed locale. Just like in offline church, the leader starts by calling the meeting prayer to order. Avatars or online participants assemble in a cluster inside the church near the altar. The service starts with the introductory remarks and proceeds to a number of stages, various kinds of prayer, sermons, giving thanks, and discussion on issues concerning the members. Finally, the leader closes the service. The formal structures of cyberchurch can also be seen in the movement and roles of the avatars; they stand in a circle near the altar and remain motionless during the service, and the leader has the right to lead the prayer as well as the discussion and speak without interruption (Schroeder, *et al.* 1998).

Cyberchurch is considered an extension of the real world church in virtual world. It is perceived a sacred space which is “set apart and surrounded by prohibitions” so that participants cannot profane things. Moving from room to room in cyberchurch is regarded similar to moving in physical church. Cyberchurch is also intended by its creator as a place where Christians meet for prayer; it is a “place of meeting rather than just a place of just going to” (Jacobs 2007:1109).

Yet, there is cyberchurch that are operated by non-affiliated religious groups and offers a different kind of services. One of the examples of this is St. John Internet



Church, an online ministry of a non-denominational Christian Church (Casey 2006:80-84). The Church invites users to worship 24 hours a day, seven days a week by clicking a link that will bring them to be in the church and to see images of the real world church. Participants of the ritual in this online church can attend the service anytime they like. They are also free to scroll through the ritual as quickly and slowly as they want, skip sections they are not interested, or stop for contemplation at interesting parts.

The reproduction of the experience of the real world religious architecture in virtual world also applies to cybertemple. Religion surfers who log on a virtual temple see a colour picture of a Hindu temple, for example, which is framed with a blue sky as the background. The image brings them to be on a path entering a main entrance of the temple. There are links that can bring them to a meditation room, a shrine, and room of *puja* (common form ritual in Hindu). Clicking a mouse is similar to walking on a path and entering to a certain room in the real world temple. Entering different rooms of a cybertemple is synonymous with doing different physical religious activities in an actual sacred place. Moving from the first page to the other pages of the cybertemple connotes the transition from entering the temple to proceeding to the inner sanctum of the temple, from the profane space to the sacred space, to make ritual or an offering to deity (Jacobs 2007:1106-8).

#### *Online Religious Community*

Furthermore, the widespread of religious use of the internet has manifested in the emergence of online religious community in virtual world. In his study on the Christian discussion groups, Lohead (1997 in Campbell 2006:13) finds that religion surfers establish “a sense of identity as community that existed independently of whatever service they choose for their electronic communication”. Online engagement has provided those who go online for religious purposes with possibilities to develop communal meanings to their religious activity online, construct personal and common religious identity, and form religious community not found offline.

Online religious community is an interactive group that develops two-way communications through various forms of technology communication such as chat rooms and email list. They meet online to share spiritual experiences and discuss a variety of religious issues, from a general issue of spirituality to a specific topic of a particular religious group of sect. They also do religion online such as moderated prayer meetings in a specific time in chat rooms such as Reapernet Chat (<http://chat.reapernet.com>) and St Sams Chat (<http://www.stsams.org/IRC.html>) or exchanging spiritual experiences in email list-serves such as <http://www.harekresna.com/science/namhatta/listserve.html> (Campbell 2005:125).

Online religious community is also characterized as a religious identity network that offers participants a sense of communal identity and binds them to a particular religious tradition, belief or ritual. In this context, for them, the internet is a space for constructing communal identity. Online religious community can also be identified as a spiritual network, in which participants use the online world for cultivating personal spirituality and sharing spiritual experiences. The internet, for some online religious communities like the Community of Prophecy, is regarded as “a space shaped by God for Divine purposes” (Campbell 2005:126). In addition, online religious community is a support network aimed for solving participants’ problems. Here, individual’s problems can be regarded as the community’s problems. In this sense, the community uses the internet as a space to develop support for solving

problems as well as facilitating personal and spiritual growth of its members (Campbell 2005:127).

However, this does not mean that membership of traditional religious organizations is under threat by the emergence of online religious community. A study by Katz and Rice (as cited in Campbell 2006:13) reveals that there was a positive association between being an internet user and a member of community or religious organization. Their findings suggest that one's engagement in religious organizations seems unaffected by one's online engagement for religious purposes; going online neither encourages nor discourages involvement in offline religious organizations. In contrast, internet use may have positive influence on organized religions. A survey by Pew Internet and American Life Project finds that 83% of churches and temples surveyed said that internet usage strengthened the spiritual life and faith of their members by helping them to stay more connected (Larsen 2000). Another survey demonstrates that the new medium of interactions maintains the offline religious communities because religion surfers go online to supplement their religious beliefs and practices, not to replace them (Hoover, Clark, and Rainie 2004).

### **Spiritual Shaping of the Internet**

Contrary to the predictions that the presence of the internet, like technology in general, would present dramatic challenges to religion and threaten its existence in modern society, the emergence of cyberreligion indubitably demonstrates that religion has the ability to shape the internet by spiritualizing the new medium. Religion can adapt itself to a new environment afforded by the internet and adopt the new medium as a new tool for strategies to survive as well develop itself in the secularized modern world. Religious communities have capabilities and possibilities to conceptualize, configure, negotiate, and influence the internet technology for their religious purposes. In the words of Helen Campbell (2005), this process is called "spiritual shaping of technology". She remarks, "the spiritual shaping of technology highlights that technology is embedded in a social process of negotiation between individuals or groups who inevitably shape them [sic] towards their own desire and values (Campbell 2005 in Kluver & Cheong 2007:1125).

In addition, the religious use of the internet demonstrates a process of what Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005 in Kluver & Cheong 2007:1125) calls "cultured technology", in which religious communities actively adopt and constantly shape the internet for their religious purposes. Most of religious traditions experience the acceptance and adaptation of the internet and other technologies for their purposes. In some Asian countries like Singapore and Malaysia, religion and religious communities have played a significant role in the appropriation of information technology (Goh 2005; Kluver and Cheong 2007).

### **Secularization Thesis Reconsidered**

What is more important here is that the massive emergence of religion on the internet can be considered a counterpoint to the assumptions of secularization thesis. Together with other evidence presented by some studies (*e.g.* Stark 1999; Berger 1999; Shupe 1990), the phenomenon of cyberreligion serves as another empirical evidence of the unfulfilled prophecy of secularization theory that scientific and technological process would bring about the demise of religion in the modern society. This shows that religiosity is positively related to the tendency to embrace scientific and technological development. Rather than being incompatible and contradictory, religion and science-technology complement and use each other as proven by the fact that people in religious nations tend to have more confidence in science and

technology than those in secularized Europe (Norris and Inglehart 2004 in Kluver and Cheong 2007:1127).

The religious existence in cyberspace undeniably indicates the persistence of religion in contemporary-modern societies. According to Berger (1999:2), secularization theory is “essentially mistaken” for global society of world today is “as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever”. He argues that, on the one hand, modernization has secularizing forces, even more so in some places than in others. But, on the other hand, it also has generated counter-secularization movements. It is also certain, he adds, that modernization has caused the lost of power among religious institutions particularly in the Western societies. Yet, in the level of individual lives, at least, religious beliefs and practices have continued to persist.

According to Berger (1999:3-4), the persistence of religion in the globalizing society has to do with the complicated relation between religion and modernity. The relation between two is not homogenous, one dominates the other. Instead, it is characterized as complicated as shown by two following strategies.

First, religious communities reject any modern ideas and values. To do this, religious communities have two strategies. On one hand, they take over society and make a counter modernity movement through religious revolution. This can be seen, among other ways, in the case of Iranian Revolution in 1979 led by Ayatollah Khomeini. On the other hand, to reject modernity, religious communities establish religious subculture to protect themselves from influences of the outside societies and foreign ideas. The Amish community in eastern Pennsylvania, the US, can be a good example. This is a promising strategy, but too difficult to implement due to powerful force of modernity and globalization (Berger 1999:3-4).

Second, religious communities and institutions develop an adaptation strategy. They take and to some degree modify modern ideas and values in the light of their own interests. As a result, generally, religious communities survive in the face of secularized world, and even flourish in some places. This can be seen in the most cases of religious stubborn in world today (Berger 1999:4). This is what we can see in the case of massive emergence of religion on the internet.

In addition, secularization theory has suffered from empirical evidence from the very start (Stark 1999:254). Commenting on the popularity of secularization thesis among theorists in nineteenth century, Alexis de Tocqueville (in Stark 1999:254) noted:

Unfortunately, the facts by no means accord with their theory. There are certain population in Europe whose unbelief is only equalled by their ignorance and debasement; while in America, one of the freest and most enlightened nations in the world, the people fulfil with fervor all the outward duties of religion.

A study by Finke and Stark (1992 in Stark 1999) shows that religiosity among American people has not decreased and Greeley’s study (1989 in Stark 1999) indicates that the rate of church membership has increased dramatically to more than triple than before. Studies by Michael Winter and Christopher Short (1993 in Stark 1999) refer to the existence of what Grace Davie calls as “believing without belonging”. They reveal a high level of subjective religiousness and a relatively low level of secularization in Europe: “What is clear is that most surveys of religious beliefs in northern Europe demonstrate continuing high levels of belief in God and some of the general tenets of the Christian faith but rather low levels of church attendance” (Stark 1999:264).

All this shows that there has not been a significant decline in belief in God and spiritual life among postmodern society. The level of religiousness remains high among them. Indeed, religion has abilities to adapt with a new environment created by technology and shape the technology for generating benefits for itself. In the context of the development of cyberspace, the internet has opened up possibilities for religious communities to develop strategies of adoption and development according to their needs and interests.

### **Conclusion**

The fact that religion survives by adopting and shaping the internet technology according to the needs of its religious communities serves as a counterpoint to the secularization thesis about the decline of religion in modern societies. For religious communities, the internet has become a medium for proliferating religious beliefs and practices (in the view of the creators of the religious websites) and seeking information concerning religious ideas and spiritual practices (in the view of religion surfers). In this sense, the internet is a tool that serves the needs of religious communities, rather subvert their existence and development.

It also can be said that the massive presence of cyberreligion supports the view of this computer-mediated communication as a place, where people can interact with “unrestricted freedom of expression that is far less hierarchical and formal than the real world interaction” (Kitchen 1998 in Helland 2002:293). The internet is a space where people can express their religious views and share their spiritual experiences without any restrictions. In addition, it is a space where religious communities can do religion online such as conducting prayers and visiting a shrine in a way that might be different from that in the real world. In this context, the emergence of religious websites represents the perception of the internet as a sacred space.

Like the impact of the invention of printing press on religion in the early modern era, the internet is revolutionary in that it has opened up possibilities in maintaining religious existence and developing its influences on spiritual life of modern society in a way that never existed in the past (O’Leary 1996 in Hackett 2006:67). Regardless of the dominance of Christianity in virtual world in that 78% of religious websites are Christian (Helland 2004 in Kluver & Cheong 2007:1126), due to the global digital divide in which 97% of internet host computers and web creators are located in the developed countries, which are generally Christians (DiMaggio, *et al.* 2001), the internet has become a medium for presenting religious beliefs, ritual and ethical practices, and for constructing personal and communal identity. Just like the fact that internet uses complement rather than replace print media and offline socialization (DiMaggio *et al.* 2001), the presence of cyberreligion harnesses the sense of religious communal identity among religion surfers and supplements to their engagement with offline religious organizations. In sum, the migration of religion to cyberworld has proved that spiritual hunger is growing particularly in the Western countries and demonstrated the new face of religion in the globalizing world for religion constantly transform itself, becoming increasingly hybrid and reflexive in a new context.

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