

Soul-Searching in Cyberspace

Christianity and New Age on the Internet

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1. Introduction

In the last few decades the Internet has developed into an indispensable medium in the daily lives of most western people. Because of its limitless space, decentralized nature and interactive possibilities it offers great opportunities for communication and the effective distribution of information in all spheres of human life. Not surprisingly, also religious and spiritual groups use the Internet intensively to proclaim their beliefs and to get in contact with fellow believers. Yet, from the viewpoint of classical sociology, this is a very remarkable observation.

According to secularisation theory, after all, the technological and religious realms are fundamentally incompatible, as the modernization and rationalization of western society will eventually lead to a ‘disenchantment of the western world’ (Weber 1996[1919]). This means that as people increasingly come to rely on science and technology, religion will be marginalised and may even disappear. Despite the ongoing scientific and technological developments, however, religious and especially ‘spiritual’, esoteric beliefs are booming nowadays (Heelas et al. 2005). The recently started Ph.D. research project of this article’s first author aims at scrutinising issues concerning spirituality and traditional religion and the Internet.ⁱⁱ Its central hypothesis will be set out in this article, focusing on the differences between Christianity and New Age spirituality in relation to cyberspace. At this early stage, we abstain from probing meaningful differences between particular types of Christianity or between different strains of New Age spirituality and we can only give examples that illustrate the plausibility of this general hypothesis. Its more systematic empirical examination and elaboration is the central task for the coming years.

2. New Age Core Assumptions and Christian Fundamentals

The main difference between traditional monotheistic world religions such as Christianity and new spiritual movements such as New Age is a fundamentally different conception of 'God'. Christianity is based upon a belief in a transcendental God, a sacred entity that can be found outside of man. Strongly related to this, Christianity puts forward a dualistic worldview, which separates body and soul, the sacred and the profane, the spiritual world and the material world. In contrast, the essential *lingua franca* of New Age is that of *Self-spirituality*. In this view, 'to experience the "Self" itself is to experience "God", the "Goddess", the "Source", "Christ Consciousness", the "inner child", the "way of the heart", or (...) "inner spirituality"' (Heelas 1996: 19). This notion of Self-spirituality does not simply refer to spirituality in the individual, but making contact with the deeper layers in the Self is held to connect one with a universal source of energy which belongs to the natural order (Heelas 1996: 33). Because 'connecting' is a way to feel united with the universe, the New Age movement consciously rejects Christian dualism and starts from the concept of holism, looking for 'wholeness' at all levels of existence (Hanegraaff 1996: 119-158).

Related to these distinct worldviews, Christianity and New Age disagree on issues such as *authority* and *tradition*. A central characteristic of New Age spirituality is individualism. This means that people are allowed, even stimulated, to explore all kinds of different spiritual beliefs and practices to choose the ones that fit them best on their personal paths to Self-spirituality. The authority to judge on the 'right' way lies with the individual and the individual alone. One respondent in a previous study on the New Age expresses this as follows:

I am God. I don't want to insult the Christian church or anything, but I decide what I'm doing with my life...There is no 'super-dad' in heaven that can tell me 'You have to do this and that or else...' I am going to feel!ⁱⁱⁱ

This non-hierarchical way of practicing religion, rejecting authorities other than the Self, is for example mirrored in the organizational structure of New Age training.

New Age teachers claim that they only lend participants a helping hand by providing a context to guide them on their individual spiritual journeys (Heelas 1996).

In Christianity, on the other hand, there is a strong emphasis on the community of religious practitioners and the authority of priests or ministers (more so in Catholicism than in Protestantism, to be sure). Since the focus is not on personal experience, such as in the New Age, but on shared values and beliefs, it is very important to most Christians to visit sermons regularly and to be actively involved in their congregations. Christian communities are typically hierarchically structured, whereas priests, ministers and other authorities on Christian doctrine are considered religious leaders of the community. They have the wisdom and authority to judge, basically in the name of the Lord, on good and bad and to set rules for the community. This hierarchy is especially visible in the Roman Catholic Church, where the highest position is that of the Pope, followed by a few thousand bishops and many more priests all over the world. The individual Christian is expected to act on behalf of the beliefs and practices shared by the church in which s/he is involved. Not doing so may in some extreme cases even have the consequence of being expelled from the community.

Another distinction between Christianity and New Age spirituality concerns the stance towards tradition. Whereas Christians rely on a long-standing tradition of religious practices and have the Bible at their disposal as the basic text to guide them, the New Age movement is characterized by 'perennialism'. Instead of focusing on a traditional set of ideas and practices, New Agers look for the binding principles in various western and non-western religious and spiritual traditions; the so-called inner, esoteric core (Heelas 1996: 27-28, Hanegraaff 1996: 327-330, Aupers 2004: 23). Since this basic principle is held to be present in various traditions all over the world, it is up to the individual to decide which tradition or traditions serve him best in developing a better understanding of the Self.^{iv} This perennialism does not lead New Agers to simply reject the Christian tradition *tout court*, but rather to reject as 'dogmatic' the specific interpretations and practises that have been institutionalised in particular churches.

3. Cyberspace as Sacred Space?

Its decentralised nature and interactivity are vital features of the Internet: in the limitless space of the virtual world each individual user can distribute content with a multi-medial character of any kind and communicate directly with people from all over the world at very low costs. These features seem to bring about challenges, opportunities as well as dilemma's for different religious groups.

Christianity and the Internet: A Mixed Blessing

Most Christian churches acknowledge the great possibilities of the Internet for practising and propagating their religion and can accordingly be found online nowadays. The Catholic Church even conceives of the contemporary media, including the Internet, as 'gifts of God', which will 'unite men in brotherhood and so help them to cooperate with his plan for their salvation'. The Internet is thought of as a useful medium in the mission to communicate 'the Good News of Jesus Christ' to various groups of people, that otherwise would be difficult to reach, as well as an effective tool for internal communication (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2002a). This positive approach can also be found at the website gospelcom.net that claims to be 'the most popular Christian website in the world'. This website, online since 1995, specifically has the goal 'to use technology and the Internet to reach the world with the message of Jesus Christ'.^v

In spite of these opportunities, the Internet is a reason for concern in most Christian communities as well. In April 2001, (Protestant) Dutch Reformed groups organised a congress to reflect on the influence of ICT developments on society, politics and the church. Although the objective was to look at both the challenges and threats of ICT, the reports on this event seem to focus on the dangerous aspects of the Internet, for example pointing to the necessity of filtering technologies when entering cyberspace.^{vi} Moreover, only a month later, the synod of Reformed congregations in the Netherlands called the Internet 'a trap set by Satan' and strongly advised believers to avoid cyberspace at all times, for the sake of the salvation of one's soul.^{vii} In the last few years, however, less orthodox Reformed congregations seem to have acknowledged that the development of the Internet cannot be ignored, trivialized or kept away from the community of believers. The discussion has therefore moved to more general questions on the degree to which true believers are allowed to get involved with the Internet and on how to handle the 'dangerous' aspects of the medium when actually online.

One of the most important issues in this debate concerns freedom of expression in cyberspace. Solicitude on this issue originates in the clash between the hierarchical and traditional nature of Christian beliefs and the decentralised and interactive nature of the Internet. The latter raises concerns about the availability of pornography and violence and the presence of websites that take a hostile stance towards the Christian faith. Even more worrisome might be the fact that Internet users constantly need to distinguish between good and bad information, whereas the integrity and accuracy of information on the Internet is never guaranteed. For example, people surfing for salvation might come across websites presented as Catholic, while offering interpretations and practices that do not reflect the position of the Vatican (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2000a and 200b). Related to this, the huge variety of religious interpretations and spiritual beliefs might lead to a ‘consumer’ approach to matters of faith, thereby neglecting the wholeness of Christian faith and raising doubts about the traditional set of Christian beliefs and practices.

Like the Pontifical Council the leaders of the Reformed congregations in the Netherlands firmly recommend media education and training to overcome this type of problems. The focus of these trainings should not lie in learning about the techniques of the Internet, but in developing standards of good taste and truthful moral judgement to manage information overload on the Internet. Christians are also recommended to use filtering technologies when surfing on the Internet. The importance of these technologies can be illustrated by the fact that many Christian Internet portals – these are websites on which Internet users can link to other websites on a variety of topics – devote a special section to web pages that provide filter applications. For example, on Christianity.about.com a top 5 of Christian Internet Service Providers is presented^{viii} and Christianity Today International offers its own web content filter^{ix}.

An entirely different concern voiced by Christian believers is the enormous amount of time some people spend surfing the Internet, because ‘problems of modernism’, such as ‘exaggerated individualism, increasing self-centredness and alienation’ are believed to may grow worse by spending too much time in cyberspace. In addition, the Pontifical Council stresses that virtual reality is not, and will never be, a substitute for participation in the offline Christian community (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2002b). Even intense virtual contact with fellow

Christians can never replace the experience of 'real life', face-to-face relations, or so the argument goes.

The New Age and the Internet: Global Connectedness

Whereas some New Agers may reject the Internet because of their preoccupation with nature, the fundamentals of New Age belief seem less in conflict with the interactive and decentralized nature of the Internet than we saw for Christianity. From the New Age point of view, freedom of expression and availability of many different views and practices on the Internet are a good thing; every perspective being an opportunity to experience the Self in a new way and to get to know it better. Moreover, the New Age relies on the confidence that every individual following the path of the soul will make the right judgement on new insights found in cyberspace. In contrast to Christianity, then, there is no need for education or training to provide the believers with a sound religious context that enables them to handle deviant readings of religion and spirituality, because the soul, the inner Self, will recognize what is good and what is not. Because of this, New Age believers do not experience cyberspace in any way as a 'dangerous' place.

The Internet also fits neatly in the holistic worldview. From a New Age point of view, after all, cyberspace can be seen as a worldly reflection or manifestation of the ultimate interconnectedness, which can be achieved by logging into this global network. It is sometimes perceived as a place where 'everything is connected' and as 'truly magical, since all it is is energy' (Nightmare 2001: 66-67). Therefore, particular groups of New Age believers, such as neopagans, even think of cyberspace as a sacred space, in and of itself. Opposed to the Christian position that participation in online communities can never be a substitute for offline participation in a congregation, these people feel such a strong affinity with digital technology that they experience cyberspace as even 'more real' than the offline world (Aupers and Houtman 2005). So, whereas Christians have concerns about the effects of the Internet for religious life, New Agers might even have a spiritual experience of ultimate connectedness by surfing the global network.

4. Religious and Spiritual Believers Online

We hypothesise that distinct ideas about the Internet found among Christians and New Agers will also become visible in the structure and outlook of their websites and in the way they worship online.

The way information is offered and the extent of interactive possibilities are vital aspects relating to the *structure* of websites. Because, as we have seen, for Christians the Internet challenges issues of tradition and hierarchy, we expect them to use the Internet in such a way as to gain control over the information that is being distributed. Ways of maintaining hierarchy online are for example censorship and the use of one-way communication instead of two-way communication features (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai 2005: 27).^x One-way communication, such as sending e-mails and newsletters to users of a website or encouraging online visitors to attend the offline church, avoids the danger of meeting anti-Christians in cyberspace. In this way, the Internet is used in a centralised fashion, comparable to traditional mass media such as newspapers, radio and television.

Another structural characteristic of Christian websites, related to the issue of tradition, may well be the offering of a limited number of links to other web pages to keep control over information that is referred to. On the website of the Vatican^{xi}, for example, one can only link to internal pages (for the website is very large), but not to websites of other organisations. In this way, the Vatican can never be held responsible for controversial information that might appear on external pages referred to. On New Age websites, however, we expect to find many links to external web pages, because New Age is not hampered by hierarchical structures or a fixed tradition of beliefs. External links would thus enable visitors of New Age sites to really *surf* through cyberspace, linking from one page to another, browsing through the encountered information. By doing so, New Agers are able to explore the possibilities for connecting with the Self. In addition, we expect a high level of interactive possibilities, enabling visitors to exchange spiritual experiences.

The use of symbols, images and multi-media technology are aspects related to the *outlook* of websites. On Christian websites the use of texts will probably dominate, except for some religious symbols to decorate the websites. To the extent multi-media applications are used, this is likely to be for functional reasons only, such as offering online sermons or religious music. In most cyber churches, however, the priest only gives a textual version of the religious service.^{xii} Only some of them are presented as a game-like, animated version of offline churches, in which visitors are

able to burn a candle, for example.^{xiii} New Agers, experiencing the Internet as spiritual in and of itself, are likely to see it from their holistic point of view as the ultimate place to establish global connectedness. We expect them to use a lot of symbols, images and multi-media technologies, to enhance the feeling of the Internet as a space and to create a virtual, spiritual world.^{xiv} In contrast with this, Christian 3-D cyber churches are likely to remain exact representations of offline churches rather than sacred spaces in and of themselves.

Based on the foregoing, we also expect Christians and New Agers to have different intentions when *surfing* the Internet, and because of this, to behave differently in cyberspace. Those who search for information on religion and spirituality online, turn out to be very active believers offline (Larsen 2001, and Hoover, Clark & Rainie 2004) and it seems plausible that these people will have internalised behaviour that corresponds with their religious beliefs. Because New Age believers are on a spiritual journey, exploring various ways to nourish the soul, they will enter cyberspace with the intention of finding new ideas that will bring them a step closer towards the Self. Their surfing is hence likely to have an *explorative* character. Christian religious surfers, on the other hand, are more likely to enter cyberspace to extend their knowledge of traditional teachings and to have contact with fellow Christian believers. Their surfing is hence more likely to have a *functional* character, because they know what they are looking for and will therefore not be open to deviant opinions.

5. Conclusion

In this article we pointed out some fundamental differences underlying Christianity and New Age spirituality, the way these are reflected in their respective views on the Internet and their representations in and use of cyberspace. We presented a basically conceptual and hypothetical approach as a starting point for empirical research.

Whereas some research has been done on religion and the Internet in general, and on the relation between New Age spirituality and technology in particular, as far as we know systematic comparisons between New Age and Christianity online have not been made yet.

Reflecting on the fundamentally different stances of Christians and New Agers towards cyberspace, we believe that they will both use the Internet in ways that fit in with their own beliefs and purposes. Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005) speak of ‘*cultured technology*’ in this context, indicating that the use of technologies will be adjusted to the needs of social groups and to cultural contexts. Heidi Campbell (2005) follows this notion in her paper ‘Spiritualising the Internet’, in which she digs deeper into the religious shaping of technologies. Although this will of course have to be studied more systematically in the years that lie ahead, it seems in general as if Christians use cyberspace in a functional way, to enhance communication in offline communities and to spread the message of Jesus Christ on a global scale. They tend to see it as merely a *tool*. New Age believers, on the other hand, seem to find in the Internet a suitable medium to explore different paths to the deeper layers of the Self and to experience global interconnectedness, with some of them even sacralising the medium itself. They tend to conceive of the Internet as a *place*, then, where a person can practice his or her religion to the fullest. This has also been referred to as the distinction between *religion online* (i.e., seeing the Internet as a tool) and *online religion* (i.e. seeing the World Wide Web as a place) (Helland, 2002). Be this as it may, there is hardly any evidence to suggest that religion and spirituality will disappear with the ongoing development of (digital) technology, as classical secularisation theory implies.

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Notes

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ⁱⁱ This project is part of the research program referred to in note 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Respondent quoted in Aupers and Houtman (2006: 205)

^{iv} This is one of the reasons why some authors consider New Age not a real 'movement' or religion of itself, but as a mere container concept to refer to a wide range of individual spiritual beliefs and

practices. However, we do believe that precisely this focus on the individual Self binds these people together as New Agers (Aupers and Houtman 2006).

^v See: http://www.gospelcom.net/home/about_gospelcom/ (visited on April 3, 2006).

^{vi} The Congress was titled 'ICT, uitdaging of bedreiging? Op zoek naar wijsheid in de informatiestroom' [ICT, Challenge or Threat? Looking for Wisdom in the Flow of Information]. A report on this event (in Dutch, unfortunately) can be found on the (old) website of the Reformed daily newspaper in the Netherlands (*Reformatorsch Dagblad*):

<<http://oud.refdag.nl/ictbezin/ictcongres.html>>

^{vii} At the moment, this information is only based on the publicity given to the advice of the synod of Reformed congregations in Dutch national newspapers, for it will be clear that the original text of the synod cannot be found on the Internet. On the June 26, 2001, a Dutch 'secular' newspaper, *De Telegraaf*, published a short article on this issue (with the headline: 'Gereformeerden: Internet is het werk van Satan. "Doe het niet voor je eigen zieleheil"' [Reformed believers: Internet is Satan's work. "Don't do it, for the sake of the salvation of your soul"]), as well as the Reformed daily paper (*Reformatorsch Dagblad*) on June 7 and June 28 (headlines: 'Oud Ger. Gem. spreken zorg uit over levensstijl: Kanselboodschap over internet op komst' ['Old Reformed Congregations are concerned about style of living: Pulpit message on the Internet on the way'] and "'Prive-gebruik internet is een grove zonde": Synode Geref. Gem. in Ned. kritiseert ook e-mailgebruik' ["Private use of the Internet is a rude sin": Synod of Reformed Congregations in the Netherlands criticises use of e-mail too'], respectively). We will make sure to lay hands on the original text when we dig deeper into this issue, of course.

^{viii} See <http://christianity.about.com/od/practicaltools/tp/christianisps.htm> (visited on April 3, 2006).

^{ix} See <http://christianityonline.com/broadband.asp> (visited on April 3, 2006).

^x Two-way communication features such as online forums and newsgroups, however, might be effective means to enhance the cohesion of offline communities. The use of passwords that are only given to offline members might be used to keep out unwelcome visitors.

^{xi} Online available on: <http://www.vatican.va/>

^{xii} See for example: <http://cyber-church.com> or http://www.christianfaith.net/ekklesia/cyber_church_e.html, following the link to cyber church meeting (visited on April 3, 2006).

^{xiii} See for an example of a 3-D church: <http://churchoffools.com> (visited on April 3, 2006).

^{xiv} An example of such a website is www.lightworker.com, on which the background looks like the universe and where one can visit several sacred rooms (these are indeed textual pages, but the notion suggests space).