Cyber Communion

Finding God in the Little Box

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Abstract

In the age of the internet people are finding new ways to connect with each other and also new ways to connect with the divine. This study explores the relationships between people in an online religious worship service at the UK-based Church of Fools and assesses whether the virtual bonds of community are strong enough to provide spiritual fulfillment. The project also investigates offering Holy Communion in a virtual church environment to assess why some worshippers would be satisfied with an online representation of the Eucharist and others would still look to physical churches for the ritual of Holy Communion. The results suggest a link between those who visited the church more often, developed a stronger bond with others worshippers, and subsequently received a higher level of spiritual fulfillment from the online service, including being more receptive to receiving virtual communion.

Introduction

[1] God is in the box, or so the 1980s tele-preachers postured about the increase in religion on television. Bakker, Roberts, Falwell and others flocked to the airwaves to compete for the religious viewership and their financial support. Televangelism has declined in the new age of reality television, but God is making an appearance in a different spectrum: the little box. Since the late 1980s there has been a steady growth of internet use, with online social, cultural, and religious communities coalescing all over the world. In America in particular, religious affiliation is partially a sign of status normally associated with possessing faith and belonging to a social group of like-minded individuals with which they partake in fellowship activities to express this emotion. How does this emergence of online religion offer a religious community to Christian believers? How and why do Christians become part of these communities as opposed to churches in the "real" world? To begin to answer these questions a study of the online interactive Christian church, the Church of Fools, was conducted specifically focusing on the ritual act of communion in an online context.

[2] Communion is one of the primary sacraments of Christianity, entailing the ingestion of bread and wine/grape juice which symbolizes the body and blood of Jesus Christ. It is assumed that communion is a ritual that must be undertaken in the presence of others in a communal setting or at least in the home with a pastor or priest, yet communion services may also be held online. On the Church of Fools website, visitors select their username and avatar, enter the sanctuary with other members, and can sit quietly, speak with other people, and in the near future might even take Holy Communion with the virtual minister (http://www.shipoffools.com/church/index.html). Using the visitors to the Church of Fools website, a survey and interview-based study was completed to answer these questions concerning the use of the internet as a religious forum and, in particular, participation in an online religious ritual.

Literature Review

[3] Religion online seeks to build a bridge between the concrete and the elusive, the physical and metaphysical, and bring spiritual issues to the forefront without the requirement of a physically present body (Cobb: 44). Every major religious tradition in the world as well as many smaller, more obscure, fringe, or cult-like groups are represented in cyberspace. But who are these people using internet resources for religious information and why did they also participate in online religious communities? According to a study by the Pew Foundation, the results are twofold. First, the surveys suggested that 67% of the people search for information about their own religious tradition. However, only 10% participate in an online chat room and only 4% participate in an online religious service (Pew). These numbers suggest that there is a divide between those who use the internet as a source of information, perhaps about religion, and those who use it as a tool to communicate and participate with a greater religious community. Helland also noticed this divide in his earlier research on religion and the internet and distinguishes between religion online and online religion. Religion online, he suggests, refers to sites that provide information about religion. Conversely, online religion refers to the practice of a religious tradition in an online forum (205). While both of these projects focused on the use of religion on the internet, some work has also been conducted on those participants who *use* the internet.

[4] Bedell was one of the earlier researchers to explore the relationship between religion and the internet from the perspective of the user's faith and not the content of the sites accessed. This study suggested that the amount of religiosity a person possessed had a direct relationship to the amount they used the internet; the more religious a person was the more likely they were to utilize the internet's resources. However, a more recent study by Armfield and Holbert conversely asserts that the more religious a person is the less likely it will be that they will use the internet, and finds "religiosity to be a negative predictor of Internet use when looking at a broad sampling of the US population" (140). While it is not my intention to prove the validity of one or the other of these research endeavors, they are indicative of an uncultivated young field that is a rich source of exploration. Using the Eucharist as a catalyst, this project focused on understanding why a participant in a virtual Christian church would feel satisfied with an online religious experience, how they feel about their connection with other worshippers in a virtual manner, and whether they feel that the online church fulfills their spiritual needs to the point where they can be separated from the "real" church. For this, members of the online Church of Fools were interviewed.

Church of Fools

[5] The Church of Fools is a United Kingdom based, online religious community that sponsored a pilot 3-month long virtual church, with guest ministers, and an online bulletin board to keep members connected between services. While the possibility of whether a community can indeed exist in a virtual environment is one that is contested, for this project community is both assumed and accepted. The idea of virtual community and online religion are inextricably linked. In order for online religion to be a validated phenomenon, so must be the notion of a virtual community (Dawson: 26).

[6] According to the website's fact section, Church of Fools endeavored to function as a religious community and house of worship. "We believe that the net offers people the chance for genuine meetings and true community, even when the people involved never get to meet each other face to face. So in this sense, Church of Fools might indeed be a real church" (2004b). Since its inception in May of 2004, Church of Fools has grown to over 8,000 members, including those registered to the bulletin boards and the main Ship of Fools Christian magazine site. These are significant numbers of

people coming together in a virtual space for religious worship, and these people are an ideal population to interview to understand online religion.

Methods

[7] This project utilized a quantitative and ethnographic approach, assessing not only how people use or are effected by the medium, but "how members of a specific culture attempt to make themselves a(t) home in a transforming communicative environment" (Miller and Slater: 1). Ethnography was particularly appropriate for this project because of its strength in developing native terms from a population, discerning recurring themes, and exploring the phenomenon from the perspective of the participant (Hine). Further, "religious movements and organizations are especially well suited for this general approach, because they do tend to be relatively well defined cultures, with particular beliefs and practices that can be documented reasonably accurately by qualitative methods such as participant observation or open-ended interviewing" (Bainbridge: 56). Several open ended interview questions were asked to assess a participant's use of the Church of Fools site, their relationship with the online religious community, and whether the ritual of communion is something that they wish would be included in the service. Questions also focused on the participant's relationship with religious communities not on the internet and whether they find communion a necessary part to religious practice. Further, quantitative variables included the correlation of demographic information such as religious denomination, age, gender, income, education, location, and marital status at the end of the survey. The surveys were emailed to the participants and were returned also via email. Survey participants were never asked their name or address or anything that might be considered information that invades privacy, other than the direct contact through their published email address. Nevertheless, problems with sampling, particularly with an online population, may never be completely erased.

Sample

[8] A two-step approach was used in contacting users through the sampling of the membership lists and advertising the project on the church's bulletin board. The membership list, totaling 8654 people, was available online and served as the sample frame for the project. Out of this, 500 email addresses were selected using a random number generator. However, not every name on the list provided an email address so the next closest name in proximity with an address was included. While it is possible that those who provided an email address might vary considerably in their responses to the interview and survey from those who did not, the sample was large enough to account for any discrepancy and random chance error. Further into the study the editors supported the project by posting a notice about the survey on the Church of Fools bulletin board in order to attract those not contacted or who might not have a published email address. A few surveys were received from this posting and hopefully also served to even discrepancies between respondents with published/non-published email addresses and those who were uncomfortable being contacted/those who chose to respond.

[9] Specifically, 500 people were contacted from the membership list. 115 were invalid or bad addresses, leaving 385 possible respondents from the initial contact and 26 people from this group responded with a completed survey. From the bulletin board posting on the Church of Fools, 11 people expressed interest in participating and 6 returned completed surveys. The response rate, therefore, was 6.7% for the direct contacts, 54.5% from bulletin board respondents, and overall response rate of 8% from a total of 32 completed surveys. While this is not a large sample for a quantitative project, when examining an online community with a limited sampling frame, smaller numbers sometimes have to suffice because the potential for obtaining more participants in a finite

population just is not there. Further, the richness of the interviews does enhance the numerical data and taken in combination allow for the depth and breadth exploration of the online group.

Results

Community and Bonds

[10] The first survey question assessed why the participant initially visited Church of Fools. There are many religious communities in the online area, so why this particular community and why now? The results mostly focused on reading about Church of Fools in a reputable online news source, such as New York Times, CNN, and ABC and subsequently being curious about the new online worship service. In fact, 62.5% of respondents initially visited the church out of curiosity with other reasons noted such as the desire to meet people, wanting to discuss religion, and hoping to find a religious experience more genuine than those found in "real" churches. Although curiosity can account for an initial visit to the church, very few of those who replied to the survey visited only one time and many were dedicated worshippers visiting almost daily. People listed varying responses for why they continued to return to Church of Fools, but most mentioned the desire to commune with others, the need for prayer, and also to evangelize those of other faiths. On the other hand, some indicated that the diversity in worshippers was one of the strengths of Church of Fools, prompting many visits during services. "I met such a diverse and fascinating range of people with such interesting views – where else in real life would I have met Muslims, Jews, Atheists, Agnostics, and every Christian denomination under one roof all eager to explore and challenge each other openly and without inhibition?" But with people joining each other in a single place for a religious purpose, can a strong religious community in an online arena really be established?

[11] The second open-ended question centered on this sense of religious community and bond and the effects caused by the lack of physical contact during worship. Many of the respondents believed that there was a strong bond in the Church of Fools community, but also tended to acknowledge drawbacks not only of online worship but the online connection between people. "The bond between us can be stronger than just seeing people at a physical church, and the sharing much more frank, but not seeing them regularly in person also means you can sort of fall out of touch." Others visited the Church of Fools perhaps in search of something different than the problems plaguing the "real" churches, and found many of the same issues in an online forum. "I have though been surprised at the potential to feel part of a community worshipping. It's just a shame that church of fools replicates all that is bad about a 'church' – an old unadaptable building, worship led by one person from the front and no interactivity or opportunity for the congregation to shape the worship. As a result, it feels a bit like a gimmick." Another participant mentioned also the simplicity of the technical side of Church of Fools was a hindrance to the worship service and the ability to connect with others. "Yes, there is a sense of religious community, but the format is hugely limiting – basically all you can do is sit and listen or speak out loud." Despite these limitations, 59.4% of the respondents said that they have communicated with other visitors to the Church of Fools outside of the website via email, chat, or by telephone. The online format offered to some their only avenue for worship and the fulfillment of this need seemed greater than the desire for physical contact during services.

[12] "I am unable to attend a church in real life very often, due to a long term physical disability and am housebound." This issue of accessibility, not only for those with difficulties getting to a physical church because of health problems, location, or other concerns, but also the time of day churches are open is one of the main benefits of Church of Fools. "The main benefit of Church of Fools is that is allows me to focus on God at a time I can't get to church. It's a portable sacred space." Other

respondents actually praised the lack of physical contact between worshippers as a benefit to an online worship environment. "I like the anonymity and the lack of physical contact. I can go and just 'be' there, alone if I want to be, even invisible, but yet still enjoying the feeling of being near others who are praying, etc. At the moment, I find this very liberating." However, only 12.5% of respondents indicated that the Church of Fools services could fulfill their spiritual needs and functioned more as a supplement rather than a replacement. "Online church can be a few moments of oasis in a working day or at the end of a long day when 'real' churches aren't open. You can also choose how long you stay. The chance to chat with people is also an improvement on a 'real' church. But, I personally need 'real people doing 'real' things in a 'real' place." Perhaps, visitors were not looking at this experience as anything more than an addition to their current spiritual lives, and approached the online services in such a mindset. "I was not really looking to fulfill my spiritual needs here. But I can tell you that there were times that I honestly felt a deep sense of spirituality within those virtual walls. I don't think a virtual church can fulfill all of ones spiritual needs, but I don't know that a real church can do that either."

[13] The answers to these three major questions indicated many corollary elements. First, those who visited Church of Fools more were also more likely to believe that a strong bond was possible in an online religious forum. A pearson's correlation coefficient was found, $r_p(32) = .36$, $p < 0.05$, indicating that those who did visit Church of Fools more often tended to feel a stronger sense of community and a bond with other worshippers than did the occasional visitors to the website. Second, those who indicated that they felt a strong connection to the religious community were more likely to contact other members in an offline venue, such as telephone or letters ($r_p[32] = .58$, $p < 0.01$). This correlation indicates that those who felt a strong community bond were more likely to contact other worshippers outside of Church of Fools, perhaps increasing the initial sense of community.

[14] Similar results were also found with respect to the perceived strength of the community and the ramifications of lack of physical contact on this bond. Those who felt there was a strong religious community did not feel that the lack of physical contact was detrimental ($r_p[32] = .56$, $p < 0.01$). This relationship signifies that those who felt satisfied with the sense of community in Church of Fools were less troubled by the lack of physical beings than those who expressed dissatisfaction with the level of bonding between people in the worship service.

[15] Finally, those who felt a strong sense of community were also more likely to indicate that Church of Fools was fulfilling their spiritual needs ($r_p[32] = .50$, $p < 0.01$). This association suggests that those pleased with the level of community bond in Church of Fools worship services were more likely to indicate that they were more spiritually fulfilled online than those who expressed a lower degree of community bonding with the online religious community.

[16] Despite the correlations established between the sense of community and number of times a participated visited, the subsequent contact between members outside of Church of Fools, less concern over the lack of physical contact, and an increased sense of spiritual fulfillment, this study aimed to grapple with a more significant question. The main direction for these questions were leading to thoughts about Church of Fools offering communion during the online service, which elicited the most polarized results of the survey.

Ritual of Communion

[17] Approximately half of the participants indicated they would be quite interested in taking part in an online communion service, while the other half was equally opposed, defining the suggestion as "almost sacrilegious." For those who had difficulty in attending a physical church, communion at

Church of Fools seemed to offer them a way in which to take part in the sacraments. "I would definitely take part in communion if offered online. God is everywhere, so why not online?" Other respondents, though, question this notion that God can travel through an internet service. "Obviously, this is all a question of the True Presence, and it's a really interesting new question – can God somehow become Truly Present in a bit of virtual bread and wine?" For those who take a very literal view of the Eucharist, there is much apprehension in an online version of communion. "I cannot see how the physical aspect of the Sacrament can be offered unless everyone is sitting with a drop of water or wine and a bit of bread, the blessing coming through the ether! There are things which should be treated with full reverence and unless there was some kind of checking the true intent of participants, I don't think that this should be offered." And while the respondents were split on whether they would or would not participate, they overwhelmingly agree that online communion will not replace "real" communion, but the majority would not be opposed to Church of Fools offering the ritual for those who seek to partake of it.

[18] There was a correlation between support for an online version of communion and whether the respondent felt that the online church was comparable to a physical church (r_p [32] = .59, p < 0.01). Those participants who felt that the community at Church of Fools was comparable to that of a physical church were more likely to also be in favor of offering online communion to members.

[19] The internet itself seems to be significant to half of the respondents, with 59.4% stating that the internet is an important part of their spiritual and religious life. Furthermore, 53.1% use the internet frequently to access information about religion and participate in other forms of religious expression online, such as religiously oriented chat rooms. It is interesting to note that the other 50% of respondents indicate that the internet is not a large part of their spiritual life, that they do not use other religious chat rooms, and do not seek religious information via the internet (r_p [32] = .49, p < 0.01). The correlation indicates that those that use the internet often as a venue for spiritual connection also felt a strong sense of community in Church of Fools.

[20] Similarly, those who indicated that the internet was an important part of their lives also tended to support offering communion online (r_p [32] = .51, p, < 0.01). This correlation suggests that, again, those who said that the internet plays an important role in their spiritual and religious lives tended to be more in favor of offering communion as an online ritual.

Demographics

[21] The respondents themselves represent quite an interesting demographic. Over half, 56.3%, stated they were currently an active member of a church that was not online while 40.6% did not acknowledge a church affiliation. There was an even distribution of male and female respondents, which was skew in age. The most prominent age group, 44%, was between 50-59 years of age, while 22% of respondents were 18-29 and 13% were 30-39.

[22] The population tended to be well educated, with 75% having some college education or above. Marital status did not offer any correlations; 25% were single, 43.8% married, 21.9% divorced or separated, and 6.3% widowed. Denominationally, the majority of respondents were Christian, with Anglican and Methodist being most frequently reported. It is intriguing that not all visitors identified themselves as Christian. It is possible that those followers of another tradition were interested in learning more about the Christian faith. It is also possible that religiousness as it is expressed online might transcend traditional denominational boundaries and the distinction between participants and non-participants in group worship might become a more important delineating factor than different religious backgrounds. In terms of occupation, the largest group, 21.9%, were involved with some type of religious work, while 15.6% were retired. Not surprisingly, 46.9% of the respondents resided

in the United Kingdom, while 31.3% were in the U.S., 9.4% in Canada, and the remainder was split between Australia, New Zealand, and smaller neighboring countries. None of these demographic variables yielded any statistical correlations with attitudes towards community, using the internet as a vehicle for spiritual fulfillment, or online communion.

Discussion

[23] There is a concern in Christianity that the physical presence of other worshippers is necessary. This has been represented, for example, in the ritual of extending the right hand of fellowship, greeting one another with a holy kiss, or the laying on of the hands in religious healing (Groothius: 47). And, as Myerhoff suggests, ritual efficacy is utterly dependent upon the presence and purposeful activity of the participant: "Rituals are conspicuously physiological: witness their behavioral basis, the use of repetition and the involvement of the entire human sensorium through dramatic presentations employing costumes, masks, colors, textures, odors, foods, beverages, songs, dances, props, settings, and so forth" (199). But based on responses to these interviews and surveys, it is possible that for some people, practicing Christianity does not require a physical presence for the legitimation of certain rituals, such as Holy Communion.

[24] Based on this project, I suggest that a person's attitude toward the internet and the role online interactions plays in their personal, spiritual, and religious lives is the crucial ingredient in whether they feel the bond in an online community or need physical contact with other worshippers. Furthermore, their online presence is related to whether they view online communion as a viable act or whether, as one respondent suggested, it is sacrilegious to even suggest such an event. For some people, the internet itself has become its own reality and in that reality anything is possible; friendships and relationships are just as strong, rituals just as efficacious, and the path to the divine just as difficult. For others, however, there remains a clear delineation between the online world and the world they know as real, where bread and wine is required to complete the Eucharist and avatars and conversation bubbles are just not enough. For them, virtual hugs are not enough.

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