# RELIGIOUS ONLINE DEVELOPMENTS IN A SECULAR CONTEXT

*by*

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*Religious groups have conceived the internet as both a promising way of increasing interest in religious issues and a threat to the core religious values. This article deals with religious developments on the internet based on theoretical perspectives on secularization. Four relevant themes are listed, namely secularization as loss of religious institutional power and authority, secularization as adaption, secularization as decrease in individual religious engagement, and secularization as changed conditions for religious communication. These themes are investigated through an empirical analysis of results from two large surveys with 1,015 Danes and 1,040 Danish pastors. The article concludes that the internet does not seem to have dramatically changed people's religious orientation. As in offline contexts, religious institutions are under pressure on the internet. Though the internet has been viewed as a new direct channel to people, evidence suggests that people are difficult to reach and that other players than the religious institutions dominate the transmission of religious messages. Secularization does take place online, but the development is counteracted by deliberate attempts to use the internet in religious activities, for instance by pastors who engage in critical negotiation of the possibilities online.*

**KEYWORDS**

*Religion on the internet, secularization, sacralization, individualization, religious authority, media sites, social networking sites, search engines, web encyclopedia, discussion groups, adaption, negotiation, dialogue, and cyber church.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION[1]

The popular breakthrough of the internet in the mid 1990s gave rise to many different expectations of the role of religion in this new medium.[2] Some thought the internet would become a perfect platform for religion in the future; either as a way to strengthen the missionary and evangelizing efforts of the established religious groups or as a way to undermine exactly these institutionalized types of religion and thereby establish more free and nonhierarchical religious practices. Some even imagined that the internet could provide an open and dialogical environment that would lead to improved interreligious relations. However, others had more pessimistic thoughts about the future of religion in the light of internet developments. Among the sceptical, some feared that cyberspace activities would decrease involvement in physical religious congregations, while others were afraid that immoral online content (pornography and gambling in particular) would be a too overwhelming competitor for religious groups trying to spread their messages online. In other words, prophecies about religious developments on the internet were divided in two overall trends; one foresaw a bright future for religion, while the other foresaw the decay of religion. In this article I will evaluate the religious development online based on an empirical study of Danes' interaction with religious content on the internet. Moreover, I will investigate and assess how the coming of the internet might have influenced religion. The starting point of the discussion will be a short exposition of theoretical perspectives on secularization, which will lead to a list of relevant dimensions to consider when studying religion on the internet.

## 2. SECULARIZATION

One of the key terms within the sociology of religion has been the concept of secularization. It has been used as a way to describe the marginalization of religion in the modern world, but it has also been discussed and contested by many scholars, not least in the recent decades, which have turned out to be not as irreligious as expected. In a book titled *The Desecularization*

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[1] An early draft of this article was presented at a paper session on religion and internet at the conference "Cyberspace 2011" held in Brno, Czech Republic, November 25-26, 2011. The author is thankful to all the comments and suggestions, which have been of great inspiration in the writing process.

[2] See Dawson (2000; 2001) and Hutchings (2010) for more thorough descriptions of these early utopian and dystopian reflections on the internet.

*of the World*, Peter Berger goes as far as to say that "the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false". He finds the current world "as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever". Therefore, he also thinks much of the literature written on secularization, including some of his own writing, should be discarded, since the predictions have proved wrong (Berger 1999, p. 2).

A fruitful way of overcoming some of the disagreements associated with the concept of secularization has been to distinguish between different types or dimensions of secularization. For instance, Karel Dobbelaere (2002) sees at least three different meanings of the concept. These are *societal secularization*, which denotes the diminishing relevance of church for integration and legitimation of everyday life in modern society, in which religion constitutes one sub-system among others and has lost its overall dominance; *organizational secularization*, which captures the adjustment of the church to changes taking place in the world; and finally individual secularization, which covers religious decline measured in terms of the degree of individual religious involvement compared to the norms of the religious group or church.

Additionally, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor distinguishes between three dimensions of secularization (2002). The first dimension considers the retreat of religion in public space. The second dimension concerns the regression of individual belief and practice, and the third dimension, which for Taylor is the most important, deals with belief as an option. He finds that we have gone "from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others" (ibid., p. 3). Therefore, this last dimension is not as much about decline in religion as such as it is about changed conditions for religion in a modern world. Yet another three-dimensional model has been developed by José Casanova (1994), who distinguishes between secularization as the decline of religious beliefs and practices, secularization as privatization of religion, and secularization as differentiation of the secular spheres.

The different models provide a basis for working empirically with questions concerning religious change in modern societies. Instead of making generalizations we are encouraged to distinguish between developments at different levels. Thus, while religion may be decreasing at some levels, it may thrive at others. For instance, a crisis of institutionalized religion may

be counterweighed by an increase in more individualized religious practices, as it has been suggested in some studies of religion in Europe (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). Thus, when we study religion in a digital context, the simultaneous presence of different conflicting tendencies of both secularization and sacralization is expected. The above-mentioned models help us to identify relevant questions and themes in order to judge what we see. In the following we will deal with these four particular themes: A) the power and authority of churches and religious groups as they appear online, B) the adaption to the potential online audiences within these groups, C) the individual web user's religious practice and engagement, and D) the overall conditions for religious communication in an online setting.

## 3. SECULARIZATION IN DANISH ONLINE CONTEXTS

Through an exposition of some of the results from my two comprehensive surveys among Danes in general and Danish pastors in particular, I will try to give an account of secularization in a Danish context as it can be observed on the internet. The two online surveys were conducted in 2009 with a representative sample consisting of 1,015 Danes and 1,040 pastors.

### 3.1. THEME 1: THE POWER AND AUTHORITY OF CHURCHES AND RELIGIOUS GROUPS

In general, we see a relatively stable level of religious engagement in Denmark over the past decades (Andersen and Lüchau 2011). There is no indication that churches and religious groups in Denmark are thriving particularly due to the coming of the internet and new media platforms. The internet does thus not seem to have boosted religious engagement in Denmark, as some utopian religious spokesmen would have hoped in the mid 1990s, although it is difficult to determine whether the new media have helped religious groups avoid further decline. Most of the religious groups and churches have established themselves on the internet, and it is relevant to ask what authority they hold there. Are people looking to the websites of churches and religious institutions to find answers on religion, or is religious communication on the internet to a higher degree controlled by other players?

The results in Table 1 indicate that religious websites are far from the only channel Danes use to gain knowledge about religion or participate in discussions on religion. Only 10 percent of the respondents have come

across religion on a religious website within a period of twelve month, while 16 percent have experienced religion on ordinary media sites. Moreover, the role of online encyclopedias, social networking sites, and discussion groups is almost as important as the religious websites. The picture is even more striking when we consider young adults aged 18 to 29, where religious websites only constitute the fourth most important source of involvement in religion. It should be remembered that institutional religious representatives, such as pastors or imams, may appear both on media sites, on social networking sites, and in discussion groups. Still, as long as they do not communicate through their own channels, the religious groups cannot expect to set the agenda and decide in what ways their religion should be framed. For instance, on media sites certain news criteria will decide which religious spokespersons are important and when religion becomes interesting (Hjarvard 2008).

| | **Total%** **(N=1,015)** | **Age%** 18-29 | 30-39 | 40-49 | 50-59 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Websites for newspapers and TV stations[1] | **16** | 25 | 16 | 17 | 11 |
| Religious websites[1] | **10** | 18 | 9 | 6 | 10 |
| Encyclopedias[1] | **9** | 16 | 7 | 9 | 10 |
| Social networking sites[1] | **8** | 19 | 11 | 3 | 7 |
| Discussion groups[1] | **8** | 23 | 5 | 4 | 4 |
| E-mails | **7** | 5 | 9 | 5 | 8 |
| Blogs[1] | **5** | 15 | 5 | 3 | 3 |
| Have not come across religion[1] | **45** | 28 | 43 | 47 | 50 |
| Do not know | **19** | 13 | 22 | 23 | 17 |

TABLE 1. "WHERE ON THE INTERNET HAVE YOU COME ACROSS RELIGION OR SPIRITUAL ISSUES WITHIN THE PAST YEAR?" (DANES)

[1] Statistically significant differences, $p \leq 0.05$.

Note: The respondents could choose as many responses as they found relevant, thus, the sum exceeds 100 per cent. Answers appear shortened in the table. Answers chosen by less than 5 per cent of the respondents have been omitted. These are newsgroups/mailing lists, video and picture sharing sites, games/virtual worlds, web TV, internet shops, chat/instant messaging and web radio. The question was part of a more extensive internet-based survey conducted in 2009.

The figures in Table 2 are equally indicative. When I asked the respondents who had actually visited religious websites over a twelve-month period how they had found their way to these sites, only 11 percent answered that they knew the address in advance, and less than 5 percent were led there by their church or pastor. More frequent ways of entering these sites were through search engines, links, and by coincidence. In other words, churches and religious groups have been given a new channel for communication on the internet, but so have others. Thus, the religious discourse on the internet is to a high degree dominated by other agents and groups than the religious institutions themselves, and overall 'secularization as loss of religious institutional power and authority' seems to be in evidence in a Danish internet context.

| | **Total%** **(N=343)** | **Age%** 18-29 | 30-39 | 40-49 | 50-59 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Through Google/search engine[1] | **56** | 65 | 74 | 57 | 46 |
| Through links from other sites | **21** | 23 | 27 | 20 | 20 |
| By coincidence | **19** | 19 | 23 | 17 | 12 |
| Knew the address in advance | **11** | 8 | 15 | 6 | 15 |
| Through friends or family | **7** | 10 | 6 | 5 | 9 |
| Through newspaper/magazine | **6** | 4 | 8 | 4 | 11 |
| Through TV or radio | **6** | 5 | 8 | 4 | 9 |
| Through church/religious group | **5** | 7 | 0 | 3 | 6 |
| Through link in e-mail[1] | **5** | 4 | 0 | 5 | 13 |
| Through a teacher | **2** | 5 | 0 | 4 | 2 |
| Through pastor/religious leader | **2** | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Other | **2** | 1 | 3 | 6 | 0 |
| Do not know[1] | **19** | 11 | 10 | 17 | 32 |

TABLE 2. "WHEN YOU HAVE VISITED WEBSITES THAT EXCLUSIVELY OR MAINLY DEAL WITH RELIGION OR SPIRITUAL ISSUES, HOW DID YOU FIND THE SITES?" (DANES)

[1] Statistically significant differences, $p \leq 0.05$.

Note: Only respondents who had visited a religious website within a year were asked to answer the question. The respondents could choose as many responses as they found relevant, thus, the sum exceeds 100 per cent. Answers appear shortened in the table. The question was part of a more extensive internet-based survey conducted in 2009.

## 3.2 THEME 2: THE ADAPTION OF THE RELIGIOUS GROUPS TO ONLINE AUDIENCES

The second theme to consider in the discussion of religion and secularization on the internet is the adaption of religious groups and churches to the potential online audiences. Whether or not this adaption should be seen as a sign of secularization is debatable. Firstly, if we take Christianity as an example, it can be argued that the Church is basically a "translation movement" (Sanneh 2009). From the very beginning the Christian churches have adapted to different geographic, philosophical, religious and cultural contexts, and overall this strategy has increased rather than decreased the influence of Christianity. Adaption is not a new approach, and when it takes place it does not necessarily indicate religious institutions on the defensive. Secondly, adaption is often a complex process and not merely an act of total submission. As Heidi Campbell points out in recent publications, churches and religious groups often engage in deep negotiation of new technical developments that are assessed critically in the light of the tradition, theology and values of the group (2010; 2012).

In a Danish internet context some kind of adaption clearly seems to be taking place. Most of the 1,040 pastors of the Danish National Church who took part in my survey show a widespread use of the internet for a variety of church-related purposes, as the figures in Table 3 indicate. For instance, over a three-month period, 81 percent of the respondents used the internet in their work on a daily basis; 86 percent picked up inspiration for their sermons; and 80 percent communicated online about baptism with parents to infants. Particularly the young pastors have adopted many of the new possibilities on the internet. Thus, almost one in three pastors under the age of 30 uses Facebook regularly, while this is only the case for 17 percent of the entire respondent group.

| | **Total%** **(N=1,040)** | **Age%** 26-39 | 40-59 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Been in contact with bridal couples | **87** | 85 | 88 |
| Picked up inspiration for a sermon[1] | **86** | 94 | 86 |
| Used the internet daily (work related)[1] | **81** | 88 | 80 |
| Been in contact with parents of infants for baptism | **80** | 82 | 80 |
| Searched for pictures/video clips (work-related)[1] | **68** | 76 | 68 |
| Found hymns or songs for a service[1] | **61** | 76 | 59 |
| Shared a sermon[1] | **46** | 60 | 48 |
| Given pastoral care[1] | **32** | 30 | 35 |
| Been on Facebook (work-related)[1] | **17** | 29 | 14 |

TABLE 3. INTERNET ACTIVITIES OVER A THREE-MONTH PERIOD (DANISH PASTORS)

[1] Statistically significant differences, $p \leq 0.05$.

Note: The question was part of a more extensive internet-based survey conducted in 2009. Some activities have been omitted. A more extensive list can be found in Peter Fischer-Nielsen (2012, p. 121).

However, the figures do not reveal the reflection and negotiation connected with these activities. In a series of qualitative interviews with eight pastors I discovered that these steps of adaption were far from uncritically taken. Clearly, there was an awareness of the possibilities and limitations in the online communication. Some distinguished sharply between the real, physical space of the church and the superficial, virtual cyber-reality, but more often they expressed an understanding of continuity between the two realms. For instance, many saw the internet as a good way to initiate personal conversations on faith with parishioners. Both because it could be done when the person felt the need, it could be done in spite of geographical distance, and it could even take place anonymously if the person preferred that. Only few felt that the online conversation itself could fulfill the purpose of pastoral care. The interviews reveal a strong sense of the importance of face-to-face contact in a physical setting, where facial expressions and emotions can be viewed and the conversation can flow more freely. It is worth noticing that few formulated these objections in theological terms;

they were mainly held within discourses of psychology, therapy or communication.

More data is needed to conclude satisfactorily on this theme. Yet, it is possible to conclude that churches and religious groups do adapt to the new media platforms, but not uncritically. 'Secularization as adaption' may take place, but it is counterweighed by conscious reflection on the developments.

### 3.3 THEME 3: THE INDIVIDUAL INTERNET USER'S RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AND ENGAGEMENT

Now we will consider the impact of the internet (and online communication) on people's individual religiosity. So far, most empirical studies have stressed continuity between people's religious experiences online and offline; those who go to church or pray regularly are also those who are engaged in religious activities online (Larsen 2004, p. 18, Campbell 2005, p. 161, Hutchings 2010, p. 295). In other words, the internet seems to have brought about neither a religious nor a secular revolution in people's lives.

In a series of questions to the group of respondents comprising Danes in general, I looked for changes that could be ascribed to the use of the internet. It is worth noticing that the answers depicted in Table 4 are self-reported changes. Other methodological approaches might reveal changes that cannot be caught by a questionnaire. However, it is interesting to notice that the most recognized change is towards a negative attitude to religion. While 16 percent of the respondents agree that "some of the things I have met on the internet have made me more critical of religion," only 2 percent agree that "some of the things I have met on the internet have made me believe more today than previously". Some other effects can be seen, but overall the respondents do not see the internet as a factor that has changed their perception of religion much.

| | **Total% (N=1,015)** | **Age%** 18-29 | 30-39 | 40-49 | 50-59 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I have become more critical of religion[1] | **16** | 26 | 14 | 16 | 11 |
| I have gained knowledge of religions I didn't know[1] | **10** | 22 | 7 | 3 | 9 |
| I have become more aware of what I believe/don't believe in[1] | **8** | 18 | 6 | 7 | 6 |
| I have gained contact with more people of another religion[1] | **8** | 17 | 9 | 5 | 7 |
| I have realized positive points in other religions[1] | **8** | 14 | 5 | 5 | 7 |
| I have gained contact with more people of my own religion[1] | **7** | 12 | 6 | 8 | 6 |
| I engage more often in religion online than offline[1] | **7** | 13 | 7 | 6 | 4 |
| I have become more religious than before | **2** | 4 | 1 | 3 | 2 |

TABLE 4. "HOW MUCH DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS?" (DANES)

[1] Statistically significant differences, $p \leq 0.05$.

Note: The table summarizes the answers of those who have answered: "I completely agree" and "I predominantly agree" to the statements. Answers appear shortened in the table. The question was part of a more extensive internet-based survey conducted in 2009.

All in all, 'secularization as decrease in individual religious engagement' does not seem to be a general tendency among the Danish internet users. Though it is interesting that one fifth of the respondents report a more critical attitude to religion, others have gained a positive interest in religion due to their activities online. The majority does not see any obvious relation between their internet use and their religious beliefs.

## 3.4 THEME 4: CHANGED CONDITIONS FOR RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION

Lastly, we will take a look at the fourth dimension of secularization: secularization as changed conditions for religious communication. Charles Taylor speaks of a situation where we have moved "from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among other, and frequently not the easiest to em-

brace" (2007, p. 3). In this meaning, secularization describes a change from external to internal authority and from certainty and predictability to uncertainty and reflectivity. It is no longer religious institutions – and in countries like Denmark a state-supported monopoly church – that can dictate what to believe and how to practice one's religion. Instead, it is you yourself who put the religious bits and pieces together in a way that make sense to you, being aware that the mosaic could have looked differently. The institutions continue to exist, but their authority is limited to the individual believer's degree of acceptance of them.

This reflexive and fluid approach to religion seems to be strengthened through the internet. One indication is seen in Table 5. More than half of the Danish respondents (and 65 percent of the youngest) found the internet to be the place to look for answers to questions concerning Christianity, while pastors and the Bible only came second and third. That a majority of the Danes choose the internet as the most appropriate place to search for answers is indeed a sign of appreciation of the individualistic and open-ended religious search. The search engine is the catalyst for the indefinite number of answers to a religious issue, and the individual decides which answers to accept. However, though the church and its pastors are no longer natural authorities they can still gain authority or importance in people's lives. 60 percent of the pastors in my survey report they are in contact with more people from the parish because of the internet, and 38 percent say the internet has brought them in more frequent contact with persons living outside the parish. Yet, the terms have changed as 'secularization as changed conditions for religious communication' has entered the scene. The pastors are no longer authorities by virtue of their position as pastor. They have to present their answers in the open dialogical contexts of the 21st century and on the modern religious marketplaces – here they have to prove to consumers and believers that they still represent a relevant message.

| | **Total% (N=1,015)** | **Age%** 18-29 | 30-39 | 40-49 | 50-59 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The internet[1] | **56** | 65 | 66 | 56 | 55 |
| A pastor | **37** | 36 | 37 | 35 | 36 |
| The Bible | **28** | 32 | 26 | 24 | 26 |
| Books[1] | **21** | 26 | 26 | 17 | 19 |
| A church[1] | **17** | 20 | 23 | 15 | 12 |
| Family[1] | **14** | 18 | 23 | 11 | 13 |
| Friends[1] | **13** | 20 | 17 | 12 | 10 |
| Christian group/organisation[1] | **7** | 6 | 13 | 8 | 4 |
| Nowhere | **6** | 4 | 6 | 5 | 4 |
| Other | **1** | 0 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| Do not know | **6** | 3 | 5 | 7 | 7 |

TABLE 5. "WHERE WOULD YOU LOOK FOR ANSWER IF YOU HAD A QUESTION CONCERNING CHRISTIANITY?" (DANES)

[1] Statistically significant differences, $p \leq 0.05$.

Note: The respondents could choose as many responses as they found relevant, thus, the sum exceeds 100 per cent. Answers appear shortened in the table. Answers chosen by less than 5 per cent of the respondents have been omitted. These are a teacher, TV programs, newspapers/magazines and radio programs. The question was part of a more extensive internet-based survey conducted in 2009.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Secularization is a complex phenomenon and should be treated as such. This article has dealt with four themes that seem relevant when dealing with religious change and secularization on the internet. Early expectations that the internet would either dramatically increase or decrease tendencies of secularization cannot be verified using the analyzed data. Rather, the results suggest a close relationship between changes taking place online and offline. Online, the religious institutions have not gained the power and authority they have lost offline, and in order to gain influence they are, to some degree, forced to adapt to the expectations of the audiences. Also, the individual internet user does not seem to be dramatically more or less religious due to the influence of the internet, though more people say they have

become more critical rather than more positive towards religion because of encounters with religion online. The evidence of the individual, search engine-catalyzed religious quest for answers is probably the most unequivocal sign of increased secularization we find online. The internet did not invent the reflexive approach to religion, but reflexivity is definitely being emphasized through the various individual uses of the internet.

As I have shown elsewhere, religious groups and churches respond differently to the tendencies of secularization they encounter online (Fischer-Nielsen 2012). Some prefer a 'one-way information sharing' approach, hoping to cut through the many choices and voices with clear and indisputable messages. Others see 'user-involved dialogue' as the solution and stress relationality over authority. Finally, a minority sees the 'cyber church' as the right strategy. Instead of insisting on the church or religious building as the only true place of worship they invite the users of the internet to participate in religious rituals online in the hope of regaining the followers they have lost offline. It is impossible to say which strategy, if any, will prove successful in the long run; but they bear witness of a situation where institutionalized religion no longer can expect the people to follow the directions they give. Competition between religious groups and churches has increased as globalization has brought them closer to each other, and developments during the past centuries have put an end to religion as a self-evident matter. The internet has not brought an end to this situation but has become yet a new arena for the struggle for attention; sometimes it helps the religious groups gain followers, other times it has the opposite effect.

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