

## DIGITAL CHURCH AND MEDIA – IN A HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

by

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*The underlying question for this article is: – “is what is now happening online really new, and something never seen outside the internet, and before the internet?” Previous research has to a large extent emphasized the distinctive characteristics of internet culture, as separated from what is happening in the “real/physical” world. That is a approach also valid for how churches online have been seen, and there has been an established distinction between religion online (religious churches and representatives with an online presence), and online religion (religion conducted and practiced in an online environment). However, technical advantages in recent years (which also has changed our behavior online) has made this distinction more fluid and difficult to defend. But there is also a historical continuity of using modern media within the church, making it difficult to claim that contemporary transformations within the Christian sphere are unique. There are several historical examples of how media use changes religious faith and practices throughout time. This article will put digital churches into a contemporary and historical context in order to discuss if it is relevant to uphold a distinction between churches online vis-à-vis churches offline.*

### KEYWORDS

*Digital church, secularization, Church history, digital humanities, virtual world*

### 1. BRIDGING THE DIGITAL AND THE 'REAL'

This paper aims to give nuances to the relation between what is happening in the Christian sphere and the relation to “the digital”. A question I’ve

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been interested in is – “Is what is happening online really new, and something never seen outside the internet, and before the internet?” The short answer is an absolute “no”, even though a more balanced answer might be “no – but the internet is definitely adding some features to it.”

Previous research has to a large extent emphasized the distinctive characteristics of the internet culture, as separated from what is happening in the “real” world, even though there is nowadays a tendency toward a more contextualizing research. In the field of religion and internet studies for example Helland made a distinction between presenting religion online and doing online religion, stating that “doing” religion online is something different from churches having a mere presence online. In contemporary literature aiming at reaching and encouraging churches to go online, there has been also a tendency to stress the unique potential for churches in internet based communication. For example Douglas Estes claims in his book on church in the virtual world of Second Life, that it “is unlike any church the world has ever seen. It has the power to break down social barriers, unite believers from all over the world ... It is a completely different type of church from any the world has ever seen”. (p. 18) Baily and Storch write about the possibilities for churches that lay in blogging “[i]magine a world where everyone has a voice, access to the marketplace of ideas, and the freedom to say whatever he or she wants. With blogs, that world is here”, and continues with “a new conversation has begun ... [and] more and more people are communicating online in a brand new way”. The potential in digital communication seems to be underrated, according to the mentioned authors above – and they are not alone.

Both the newness and the potential of the internet and computer mediated communication are stressed in these quotations. If they are right it seems like the internet will revolutionize the ways people and the church communicate – and that there is a huge potential in it, if only churches and their representatives learned the way to communicate.

Even though the internet is contributing to something specific to contemporary Christian faith and practices, there is a continuity stretching throughout history, and there are also similarities with what is happening in the “physical” world. There are several arguments in advantage of a more balanced view upon the relation between religion and media. This paper puts forward three arguments:

- 1) The ubiquity of Internet – Internet has in only recent years further integrated into our lives.
- 2) Historical continuity – Churches have always used media to spread the Gospel.
- 3) Contextual similarities – what is happening online reflects the offline world.

This paper will focus at the last two bullets, and only acknowledge the fact that internet is becoming ubiquitous and integrated into our everyday lives. As Hogan and Wellman (2012) put it: “The internet’s growth meant it no longer stood apart from the rest of life, if it ever had. The internet has become embedded in everyday life, a routine appliance for communicating and being informed. Indeed, many people do not even think they are on the internet when they are instant messaging or chatting.” (p. 49) Knut Lundby argues along similar lines when it comes to church, and he writes: “The church in cyberspace is church in the world, simply, because Net communication has become part of everyday life.” (p. 31, Devices are today connected and related to each other to an increasing degree. Cars, roads, refrigerators, stores and so on are wired. In our lives we are continuously spending more and more time online, and we are also representing our identities online, today primarily through various forms of social media. Developments on the technical side have pushed the process forward, and through smart phones, tablets, laptops and mini computers we have the possibility to be seamlessly connected to the internet.

## **2. HISTORICAL CONTINUITY**

Mankind has always communicated in different ways, the last couple of thousand years through various forms of media; from rock carvings and paintings, written word on clay, parchment, and paper, to printing and broadcasting sound and visuals through air. Simultaneously the spiritual side of life have also in one way or another been transmitted through sculptures, icons, incantations, printed texts, and radio and TV shows. The study of religion and media indicates that media and religion are two different entities, and theories focusing upon mediation and mediatisation claim how media affect the message. Marshal McLuhan’s phrase “the medium is the message” illustrates this approach on a very general level. On the other side someone like Stolorow claims the two entities cannot be easily separated, rather that religion cannot be understood without media. By doing that, he

also questions the whole concept of a relation between modern communication technology and secularization saying that “[the] metanarrative is structured around the assumption that the mere expansion of modern communication technologies is somehow commensurate with a dissolution of religious authority and a fragmentation of its markers of affiliation and identity.” (p. 122) However, one can also note how church and its’ related practices transform in conjuncture with the use of media, but as Stolow points out – there is possible no straight-forward or determined direction of the process. David Morgan points out when talking about mediatisation and the relation to religious transformations that “a problem with mediatisation is that nothing in it seems essentially new”, and directly related to neither modern media in general nor the internet in particular. At the same time there is a relation between media and religious change.

One, by now, classic example of how the use of modern information technology changes the prerequisites for churches’ practices and structures is the Lutheran Reformation. Eisenstein convincingly argues for how the Reformation relied upon, and benefitted from, the printing technique. Luther was a literate, writing and printing person, and without printing technology Luther’s writings would never have had that subversive effect on the Catholic Church. The Protestant branch of Christianity, from Luther onward, focuses on the written word as a means to reach out to new people, to a larger extent than the Roman Catholic or the Orthodox traditions. The spoken and written word is in focus and the liturgy, the sacraments and the tradition of the church (as in the Catholic or Orthodox Church). And it is somewhat incorporated into Protestantism to use any means, any media, to reach the unreached, while within the Catholic and the Orthodox Churches the traditions and the experiences of the physical Church and its sacraments are more important. “Print media were to play a key role in realizing this Evangelical Christendom because print – not sacrament or liturgy, or traditional institutions – was the chief manifestation of the body of Christ, the emerging visibility of the church as a global reality”, according to Morgan.

In a world where institutionalized Christianity is in decline, churches turn to internet to start communicating with people afresh. In published articles I’ve pinpointed some of the similarities between the Protestant revivalist movement (of Pietistic and Methodist origin, sometimes called just Evangelical) of the 19th century and the current situation. During the 19th century so called colporteurs (itinerant distributors of books) and tracts were

the most modern tools for communication at that time, and related to the new industrialized and more effective way to print, due to the steam press and cheaper paper. The belief in the power of the word (spoken or written) was strong within Protestant revivalism – if people only were exposed to the word of God they would convert. Tracts were the closest alternative to oral preaching, and a favored second choice for spreading the Gospel. Tracts were immensely distributed, they focused at different target groups, and were published in different formats – from Bible quotations to books with stories resembling of contemporary fictional literature. The tracts should rain over the country giving spiritual life to people, or the tracts were the seed to give growth to the kingdom of God, to use two Evangelical metaphors.

Another reason for contemporary churches and their representatives to use modern media, shared with 19th century Evangelicals, is that communication through tracts or the internet is similar to the form of communication people are used to. Tracts were often written in formats according to recognizable narratives, as “ordinary” secular fiction. Thereby, the idea was, people could be interested in the story, and at the same time implicitly be exposed to the word of God – and in due time convert to Christ. Today there is also a such underlying idea behind the use of social media such as Facebook, blogs and Twitter since those are the ways people communicate today. Through using these channels the assumption is to make the Christian message accessible to people in a well known format, but also to integrate the Gospel with people’s usual stream of information and communication. Both tracts and social media have the benefit, it is thought, to speak to people in a personal voice, dissolving traditional hierarchies there might be between the church and the laity.

A third reason to use modern media, whether it is tracts or internet based communication, is the way they are seen as encouraging relations, which is supported and sought for within many churches. The participatory culture of the internet is a role model of some churches, but as historians have shown it is not that new and primarily associated with internet. The motivation to build lasting relations originates, once again, from the fact that the Church is seen as it has lost its relation with the pew (which is related to the process of secularization). The possibility for lay people to hand out targeted tracts, was a way to open up the conversation and bridge the gap between the Church (fellow Christians and its representatives) and the

persons to reach. The same thing is valid to digital communication of today, especially in relation to social media. Churches, likewise as politicians, companies and newspapers and so on, want to use social media to build relations with “common people”, in order to strengthen interest and loyalty to the “product”. Baily and Storch formulate it as: “There is a new passion for authentic communication. People want to be part of an open and honest conversation. ... One-way communication is no longer enough.” (p. xiv) Another reason for churches to use social media and involve in various forms of computer mediated communication is to be present where people actually are – online. During the 19th century colporteurs, tracts, sharing testimonies, prayer meetings and the community among believers were all parts of the participatory culture of the Evangelical revivalist movement.

### **3. CONTEXTUAL SIMILARITIES**

It is possible, as made above, to argue that the use of modern media within churches is not as new or as particular as it is sometimes claimed to be. Another question is to what extent processes taking place online are phenomena isolated from processes offline, in the so called physical world. The internet is a many-to-many communication tool and qualitatively different from older one-to-many communication channels. On internet anyone (with access to a computer and the internet) has the possibility to reach out to a wider audience and find a community and followers. Consequently, one often discussed feature in relation to this aspect of internet is the democratization aspect – the inherent ability to undermine existing power structures, which of course affects hierarchical structures such as traditional churches. We have seen how internet outside the Church has contributed to undermining the role of journalists or teachers, or even dictators in relation to the Arab spring.

When tracing religious transformations in society the concept of secularization is often used as the framework of interpretation. The concept is widely discussed, and this is not the place to go into that discussion at length, but the concept often boils down to how religion has lost its hegemonic role in society and in the life of ordinary people (at least in Europe, and there are many exceptions). The process of modernity has, roughly generalized, according to traditional secularization theory, lead to the marginalization of religion to a restricted sphere of society and that scientific knowledge replaces religious superstition. Simultaneously religious faith and

practices have become a niche activity among all other beliefs and activities. A more pluralistic society undermines any all-embracing world view and any worldview has to be marketed and sold on an open market. This pluralistic situation has been in place for a long time in for example the US, and there Christianity throughout history has adapted and succeeded fairly well. The market analogy has during the last century been increasingly valid in Europe as well, with its tradition of state churches, now losing their grip over people, the state and mentalities.

This has opened up the possibilities for individuals to pick and mix their own choice of religion. Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead talk about a “subjective turn” in contemporary life, implying that the individual faith and experience is becoming increasingly important at the expense of beliefs in an objective (transcendent) religious truth outside man. Charles Taylor has an interpretation along similar lines and claims there are no longer fixed boundaries between religious traditions. This process of dissolving traditions, or the mixing of them, can be seen as a way to deal with the market situation. No idea, ideology, or religion can be taken for granted, and for example churches have to adapt in order to keep and to get adherents. This does not necessarily mean people are less religious, rather that it has become increasingly difficult for traditional churches and denominations to do “business as usual”. Interestingly enough none of Bruce, Berger, Heelas & Woodhead, or Taylor do talk about what is happening online.

This development should be seen as a process over the last two centuries, and not solely restricted to our era of internet based communication. The pluralisation of religious faith started with the Reformation, if not before (the Orthodox and the Catholic Churches were separated in 1054), and thereafter we can see an increasing diversification in the field of religion. This process was further pushed forward with the revivalist movements of the 19th century, which in conjunction with an emerging industrialized society contributed to an even further distributed diversity. In this situation revivalist movements started to launch a variety of activities in order to become more appealing and amusing to people, whether it was brass bands, soccer teams, choirs, outdoor picnics, and so on . Today there are a variety of activities and different services within contemporary churches to appeal to the visitors.

In for example the virtual world of Second Life we see similar patterns, it is about the very same world Estes (quoted in the beginning of this paper)

says that “is a completely different type of church from any the world has ever seen”. This article argues that churches in Second Life reflect general trends in society, rather than being something utterly different. The scale and pace of which things happened in the virtual world is maybe larger and faster, but there are still the same mechanisms at play. Second Life encourages new forms of living and performing religion since it is possible to construct any form of building or landscape for a small amount of money; the avatar gives people the possibility to be anonymous; and the global dimension makes it possible to find people with any kind of religious preferences.

For example Taylor sees a tendency to dissolve traditions in the religious sphere offline, and that is the case in the virtual world as well. Churches are built in many different ways – ranging from mere copies of a “real” physical church, to more imaginative churches – for example a beach house or a Hawaiian influenced landscape, or a crystal cave. One church was aiming at people within Goth culture, hence building a church according to Goth aesthetics mixing a traditional church construct with a Goth night club. Another church celebrated services according to the Handbook of the Swedish Church, in a small stone church, with a Catholic inspired monastery on a mountain top just next door. One clear tendency is however to build churches, or places for Christian fellowship, with an open structure, welcoming people just to hang around, sit on cozy pillows, and socialize in a friendly inviting atmosphere.

The process of secularization, here meaning that Christianity has lost its all encompassing hegemony and power, and also the related process of pluralisation of the social life, has resulted in an open market in which religious actors have to compete. That is even more obvious in a virtual world in which people have no social or religious pressure to consider. If someone wants to see what is going on in just any church it is easy to go there. Any environment is only one mouse click away. In the physical world churches can work with different forms of services, concerts, movie nights, discussions, meetings and so on, which has been done since the 19th century. In Second Life anyone can develop their own meetings or prayer groups, or build a monastery, a tree house, a rollercoaster, a full sized Formula 1 race track, a night club, a village, or a fishing pond. The possibilities are only restricted to the imagination, and this potential is used in various ways, basically to give people an added value to their church commitment, and to keep the faithful to the specific church.

The participatory culture, related to the development of the social and interactive web (web 2.0), is sought for within the church. There is a discussion about the hierarchical structure of the offline church, dividing people into mere producers (clergies and other staff) and consumers (the pew), and the aim is to involve people to a larger extent into the work of the congregation, similar to the concept of the produsage. When churches now move into social media one objective behind it is the possibility to involve people. In Second Life this is obvious. The churches, or sites, for religious activities invite to participation or have elements of participation. Churches are often open structured rather than the ordinary structures similar to sitting in a bus, and praying, discussions, and fellowship are emphasized rather than listening to sermons. One reason behind moving into Second Life can be to support a participatory culture and in Second Life it is easy to experiment with new ideas – ideas circulating in the offline world as well.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

To conclude – what is happening on the internet within the religious field cannot be seen as a separate phenomenon. Activities online reflect activities offline – at least in the everyday life of most people, one can assume. People usually don't do completely different things online compared to what they do offline, not even in virtual worlds such as Second Life (even though role playing is an essential part of Second Life-culture). Religious activities online tend to be complementary to offline commitments, and not replacing them.

The use of media is nothing new in a Christian, or religious, context. Ideas behind, and the aims related to, the use of media has been around for centuries (see also Morgan 2011). Luther took advantage of the printing press, the Evangelical revival of tracts and consequently in a contemporary context churches use digital media to reach out, just to mention only a few examples (leaving for example radio, movies, and TV outside the discussion).

It is often claimed that the use of digital media democratizes and undermines hierarchical structures, through empowering individuals and involve them in a mutual dialogue. That is probably true, but not the only truth. Intertwined with the discussion in relation to Stig Hjarvard's mediatisation theory is the assumption that the emergence of an autonomous media sphere the last century, and a weaker Church, is related to the process of

secularization meaning that religion is loosening its dominance over the way people interpret the world. Religion is now mediated through media instead of through the institutionalized Church and adapting the word of God to the logic of the media.

Still, there has been a tendency toward democratization within the church even before we had a media situation similar to what we have today. This change has been interpreted in terms of secularization before, focusing on the changing role of the church in the physical world. Changes within the social, political, economical, technological, scientific spheres have all contributed to religious changes – and likewise religion has contributed to changes in the other spheres. They are all interrelated. The bottom line is that it is quite difficult to isolate general social transformations to simple cause-and-effect models, whether it is offline or online.