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On-Line Religion

A New Context for Religious Practice

By PAUL A. SOUKUP

Open discussion of religious issues, free of the control of church bodies and freely available to large numbers of people, introduces something quite new into the church and into theology.

THAT RELIGION APPEARS on the Internet should not surprise anyone. After all, individuals and churches have quickly adopted almost every communication technology, beginning with Johannes Gutenberg's printing press, which turned out the Bible as its first product.

Closer to this century, we saw a fledgling motion picture industry produce Bible films and biblical epics, satisfying both piety and box-office demand. Two films based on the passion of Christ appeared in 1897: "L'Écarlaton" (France) and "The Horitz Passion Play" (United States, but filmed in Bohemia). The next 20 years saw other passion plays, lives of Christ and epics like the Judean episode of D. W. Griffith's "Intolerance" (1916). Cecil B. DeMille made a career of the entertaining biblical drama: "The Ten Commandments" (1923), "The King of Kings" (1927), "The Sign of the Cross" (1932), all the way to the remake of "The Ten Commandments" (1956). Religious and biblical films form a cinematic tradition that continues to this day.

Something similar happened with radio. Within its first months of operation, KDKA, Frank Conrad's pioneering Pittsburgh radio station, went on location to the Calvary Episcopal Church, where a precociously ecumenical crew of engineers donned choir robes to broadcast the sermon. This first effort opened the doors to religious broadcasting of all kinds: the evangelism of Aimee Semple McPherson, the social preaching of Father Charles Coughlin, the Old Fashioned Revival Hour of Charles Fuller, the Sacred Heart Program of Father Eugene Murphy and even the wildly popular but ultimately doomed on-air denunciations of Los Angeles sinners by Robert "Fighting Bob" Shuler in the 1920's. Religious radio survives in a more mature form, of course, in almost every city and stretch of lonely highway, featuring sermons, Bible study, prayer, talk and music.

Broadcast television, too, had its early religious moments. Who can forget Bishop Fulton Sheen giving Milton Berle a run for the ratings with his "Life Is Worth Living" series? The Rev. Billy Graham's crusades drew huge local and national television audiences. Though network coverage of religious topics has

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ART: GREG HIGH

fallen off now that the FCC no longer requires that they offer free time to religious groups, the networks still regularly carry the papal Christmas Mass and other religious services.

Cable television and its satellite distribution proved an even more fertile ground for religious television. The evangelical churches have taken the lead by creating imaginative programming like the 700 Club and the P.T.L. Club, or producing televangelists like Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, Robert Schuller, Jim and Tammy Bakker, and Jimmy Swaggart. In the Catholic tradition, Mother Angelica has successfully maintained a cable network, EWTN, and an ecumenical group launched the Faith and Values (now Odyssey) network.

With a heritage like this, the Internet seems assured of religious use.

That heritage endures because it has a theoretical backup. The rapid adoption of new communication technologies by the Christian churches stems from a number of factors. The centrality and importance of the Bible guarantees content for Christian programming and an initial audience. A generally optimistic view of technology (what the Second Vatican Council called "the marvelous technical inventions" of the modern age), leads to a willingness to try new tools. And the felt urgency of the Great Commission ("Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit"—Mt. 28:19) motivates individuals and churches to do whatever they can to spread the good news. Ben Armstrong of the National Religious Broadcasters claims that reflecting on that passage of Matthew's Gospel led directly to the evangelical use of broadcast satellites. Paul VI made a similar point: "The church would feel itself guilty before God if it did not avail itself of those powerful instruments which human skill is constantly developing and perfecting. With their aid it may preach 'upon the housetops' the message which has been entrusted to it" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, No. 45).

What Is On Line?

If Christians naturally use new technologies, then the Internet provides an opportunity to see how they use them. Just what is out there on line? A quick look at the World Wide Web using a standard search engine shows 16,500 "faiths and practices" sites and 12,000 "Christianity" sites. These include 970 churches, of which 360 are Catholic parishes. Catholic institutions are well represented: 125 religious order sites, over 100 religious publications and 130 other Catholic organizations. Over 150 seminary Web pages appear, of which Catholic seminaries sponsor 12.

The Vatican has its own Web site, complete with texts of recent documents. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the United States Catholic Conference also have a site, as do about two-thirds of the dioceses in the United States.

The Bible appears on at least 250 sites, with another 10 devoted to selling Bible software. Homiletics is popular,

with over 1,000 sites, some containing homily hints; many others present the homilies of individual pastors.

The Web also contains archives of ecclesiastical and theological documents from a variety of Christian traditions, plus links to a dozen theological libraries. These usually contain still more links to religious references around the world.

Web indices list spirituality sites from angels to women's spirituality.

What's on line in religion? A quick synthetic summary would include reference materials (the Bible, theological texts, homilies and homiletic resources, religious documents), institutional information (dioceses, churches, religious communities, publications), spirituality (Bible study, meditation guides, spiritual advice) and evangelism (apologetics, catechetical information, personal witness).

How Is the Internet Being Used?

Though such richness delights the imagination, on-line religion raises a number of questions for further reflection, most with no easy answers.

A difficult but not impossible question arises when we ask how people use religious resources on the Internet. I honestly don't think anyone has done any empirical research on the question, but judging from what is known of other religious communication, I will guess that the use falls into five broad categories. First, people find on-line religion a good reference tool for locating churches, church organizations and documents. Second, it serves a study or educational need: People can learn from its content. Third, some on-line religious material provides the high-tech

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equivalent of spiritual reading. It nourishes and lifts the spirit in a contemporary and interactive way. Fourth, on-line religion can foster a kind of community—at least a virtual community—with like-minded individuals. Indeed, a number of sites encourage a more conscious community through chat rooms and bulletin board discussions. And, fifth, those Internet sites both confirm and validate people who see their beliefs, churches, organizations, pastors, schools and so forth on line.

A second important question (and one also open to research) asks who has provided all this religious material. As the now famous Steiner cartoon in *The New Yorker* put it—the dog at the computer keyboard talking to the other dog—“On the Internet, no one knows you’re a dog.” Religious Internet sites, like every Internet site, have no verification, and every page looks equally credible. A search for “Catholic teachings” could equally well turn up the Vatican Web site, that of a fourth grade C.C.D. class and one from a group opposed to Catholic thought.

As a popular medium, the Internet does not have (and generally opposes) editorial control or editorial review.

Many see the anonymity and openness of the Internet as a virtue; it promotes more active participation and provides an equally high soapbox to every person. If “no one knows you’re a dog,” then no one can judge you except on the merits of your ideas, goes the received wisdom.

Lest we get lost in a kind of populist admiration for the Internet, we should also ask a third question: “Who is not there?” or “What is not represented?” These questions apply just as much to religious content as to other content; we must recognize that the Internet currently excludes as many voices as it promotes. Those without access to technology do not appear on the Internet. That category includes people already marginalized, people with low incomes, people of certain educational levels, people with some hesitation about technology and people busy with other things. The Gospel poor, by and large, do not share in on-line religion as we now see it. Even without gatekeepers, the Internet has its gates.

Other questions appear in this context of larger issues. Despite the sense of virtual community, what does on-line religion do to religious experience? Does it privatize practice more than other religious technologies and practices? Or does it involve people more in religious expression? Can on-line religion evangelize? The evidence here appears mixed. Just as with other newer communication technologies (television and cable television, for example), the technology isolates some people, highlighting the individualistic aspects of religion, while bringing other people more actively into a Chris-

tian community. No technology affects everyone in the same way.

What Difference Will It Make?

Finally, does all this matter? In a word, yes—and not just in terms of who uses the Internet, who does not, and how they do or do not use it. It is possible that the church will be vastly transformed by information. The Internet

provides immediate access to a wide range of religious materials, usually more quickly than do the traditional channels of distribution. For example, Pope John Paul’s encyclical *Fides et Ratio* appeared on the Vatican Web site the same day the Vatican released the text. This allowed people throughout the world to bypass commentators and news reports and read it for themselves.

The Internet also has the potential to increase the number and range of voices participating in religious discussions. The Pope and the bishops do not hold a monopoly on religious Web sites. In fact, this phenomenon

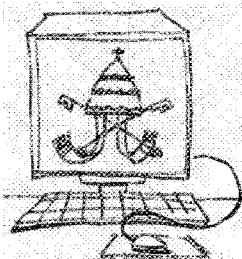
of open discussion of religious issues, free of the control of church bodies and freely available to large numbers of people, introduces something quite new into the church and into theology. Since discussions can no longer remain strictly “in house,” the Internet promotes a kind of grass-roots ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. When the Second Vatican Council called for greater information and public opinion in the church, few if any participants envisioned opening the windows quite so widely, much less did they foresee Windows 95.

Each new communication technology and its rapid adoption has introduced a new context that affects religious practice. The printed Bible made it possible for everyone to own a Bible, to read it and to study it. In the Reformers’ vision, it made possible unmediated access to the word of God.

The mass media of radio, television and film intensified the communication process and allowed instantaneous (and mostly one-way) information to reach great numbers of people. By their very nature, however, radio, television and film heightened centralized control and one-to-many transmission and in the process made people more aware of and a bit suspicious of centralization and hierarchy. By fostering entertainment and spectacle, they reintroduced the visual pageantry the Reformers had removed.

The Internet is the first communication technology with the possibility of many-to-many communication, and with the possibility of a true democratizing of communication. It is too early to predict where this will lead, but it is safe to conclude that it will have religious consequences no less profound than those brought about by the older communication technologies.

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ART: MICHAEL O'NEILL MCGRATH, O.S.F.S