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On-line Rituals: A New Field of Research

Neo-pagan and Muslim Cyber Rituals

In 1967, Thomas Luckmann published *The Invisible Religion*, a groundbreaking work in the field of the sociology of religion. This book has had a tremendous impact on the academic study of the role of religion and religiosity in modern society in many respects. Contrary to the view that prevailed in the late 1960s, in this work Luckmann argues that, even though church attendance is declining in Western Europe, religion and religiosity have not disappeared. Although secularisation and institutional specialisation have reduced the importance and influence of church-oriented religion, people still have a need for religion and transcendence. Therefore, according to Luckmann, while church-oriented religiosity has been declining, new forms of religion have emerged in western society. One result of this process has been the development of a so-called invisible or private form of religion, that is, a religiosity separating the individual from the institutionalised, church-oriented religion. Now the individual is placed at the centre and the believer is more or less autonomous and free to think what he or she wishes.

> To an immeasurably higher degree than in a traditional social order, the individual is left to his own devices in choosing goods and services, friends, marriage partners, neighbors, hobbies and [...] even "ultimate" meanings in a relatively autonomous fashion. In a manner of speaking, he is free to construct his own personal identity. (Luckmann 1967: 98.)

The driving force behind this change is primarily the process of urbanisation and industrialisation – two factors contributing to the rise of modern society. According to this point of view, modern society gives the individual great freedom, because it is more focused on the individual than the collective. Modern society is also dominated and characterised by a high degree of functional differentiation in its social structure. As a result, according to Luckmann (1967: 35), church-oriented religion has become a marginal phenomenon in modern society.

> The span of transcendence is shrinking. Modern religious themes such as "self-realization", personal autonomy, and self-expression have become dominant. More recently, they have fused either with the newly emerging mix of pseudo-science and magic or with certain rearticulations of the intermediate and great transcendences in the ecological components of the "New Age". The shrinking of transcendence thus does not mean a loss of the "sacred". The dominant themes in the modern sacred cosmos bestow something like a sacred status upon the individual himself by articulating his autonomy. As the transcendent social order and the great transcendences cease to be generally significant, matters that are important to the privatized, partly egoistic and hedonistic, partly ecological, symbolically altruistic individual become sacralized. And, of course, the offer of the traditional social constructions of the great transcendences on the part of the traditional universal religions still remains open. (Luckmann 1990: 138.)

Because of this development, the family or clan seems to play a less important role for the individual in modern society than in so-called pre-modern societies. Through the establishment of social institutions, such as social healthcare, kindergartens, etc., the individual has acquired better opportunities to develop his or her worldview with little influence and interference from the surrounding society. The rise of secularism, together with the spread of fundamentalism and New Age movements, should all be seen as responses and reactions to this development. Even though they generate different solutions, they are all products of modern society.

Today the individual's freedom of choice is also influenced and stimulated by such processes as globalisation, migration and the development of the new information and communication technologies (cf. AlSayyad and Castells 2002: 1–6). By using this technology, the individual has become, for good or ill, freer from the collective to a greater extent than Luckmann predicted in the late 1960s. By looking at two so-called on-line rituals – a neo-pagan *blot* and a Muslim *dhikr* – I shall examine and illustrate how religiosity may be articulated on the Internet. Although Internet research is often discussed in relation to methodological and theoretical problems, I shall argue that rituals performed on-line should be included in the academic study of religion. Common problems associated with Internet research (questions of representation, source criticism, etc.) in themselves stimulate the development of new methods and theories for studying on-line religiosity. This text deals primarily with theoretical issues, but if we want to say something about on-line religion, more empirical data will be required – I intend to undertake this venture in the course of my recently initiated project on religion and the new information and communication technologies.

Religion and globalisation

In recent years, a large number of works have been written with the aim of analysing and explaining the so-called "globalisation" process and its impact on religious communities around the world. To my knowledge, however, only a limited number have paid any attention to how religious communities are influenced by the new information and communication technologies. How Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) is used in spreading information about religious worldviews, and how religious groups are taking advantage of information technology, is almost unknown. This is surprising, since the development of the new technology, especially the Internet and communication devices such as mobile phones and handheld computers, have been the driving force behind the phenomenon often labelled globalisation. Although it is difficult to define what we mean by globalisation, it is clear that the world has gone through a large number of changes. These changes will also have profound implications for religious discourse.

In recent decades, it is clear that production, consumption and distribution patterns have been transformed to the global level (Castells 2001). For example, prior to the Second World War, Sweden was in many respects a homogenous society, especially with regard to language, religion, and culture. Since the 1960s, like so many other European countries, Sweden has been transformed by changes in economic structure (the country has gone from an economy based on agriculture to industrialisation and information technology) and by increasing migration from non-European countries. As a result, it is possible to find almost every cultural and religious variation in Sweden today. From this point of view, Sweden could be described as a multicultural and multi-religious society.

In *Religion and Globalization*, Peter Beyer (1994), demonstrates convincingly that these changes have also had a great impact on most religious communities around the world. His analysis also shows that religious groups respond differently to the so-called globalisation process. On the one hand, there are groups that argue that globalisation is something positive that will liberate humanity. On the other hand, there are groups that argue against this same change as negative and evil. Zygmunt Bauman demonstrates a similar tendency when he writes that the changes brought about by globalisation liberates some people and enslaves others.

> For some people it augurs an unprecedented freedom from physical obstacles and an unheard of ability to move and act from a distance. For others, it portends the impossibility of appropriating and domesticating the locality from which they have little change of cutting themselves free in order to move elsewhere. (Bauman 1999: 18.)

Irrespective of mixed feelings, it is clear that the new information technologies have had a great impact on most religious communities. New religious groups and religious minorities especially, for example, Muslims living in the west, use the Internet to distribute information and seek out possible ways of interpreting their religion in a new context (cf. Bunt 2000; Larsson 2002). Today it is easy to find almost any interpretation of a particular religious tradition on the Internet, and in most cases it is the individual who will judge whether a webpage offers good or bad suggestions, a fact that creates both possibilities and problems. Using a computer with a modem, for example, it is easy for believers to stay in contact with other groups or local traditions, regardless of time or physical boundaries. Thus, for example, it is possible to send a question concerning practical or theological issues to an imam in Iran even from a Stockholm suburb (cf. Thurfjell 1999). According to Nezar AlSayyad and Manuel Castelles (2002: 4), this development seems to be giving birth to a placeless culture created through the increasing interconnectedness of local and national communities. This outcome is closely linked with both the process of globalisation and the new information and communication technologies.

At the same time, many religious groups are afraid that this new technology will also harm religious authority and tradition. However, this kind of anxiety is not unique to the Internet: the development of other technologies (for example, the printing press or the telegraph) created similar responses (cf. O'Leary 1996: 784–85; Skovgaard-Petersen 1992). But equipped with a computer with access to the Internet, it is easy for the believer to find interpretations that question local authorities and present alternative worldviews. As a consequence, there is a general fear among many groups that the Internet will support a movement that will replace knowledge with information, as demonstrated on the webpage of the *Muslim Student Association* (MSA).

> Warning (especially for Muslims)
>
> There are many early hadith scholars and teachers to whom we are indebted for introducing the critical science of collecting and evaluating ahadeeth. These teachers each collected many different ahadeeth. They did not allow students to quote from their collections until the students had actually come to them and learnt from them directly.
>
> Today, the situation is different. The collections of ahadeeth have for the most part stabilized, and with the advent of the printing press, the collections are easily mass-produced. There is a blessing in all this of course, but there is a real danger that Muslims will fall under the impression that owning a book or having a database is equivalent to being a scholar of ahadeeth. This is a great fallacy. Therefore, we would like to warn you that this database

> is merely a tool, and not a substitute for learning, much less scholarship in Islam. (http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/reference/searchhadith.html; 11.7.2002.)

Even though the *hadith* database set up by the MSA provides access to the four Sunni collections, the believer is advised not to confuse this information with knowledge of Islam (*ilm*). From this point of view, the Internet could be described as a double-edged sword: on the one hand it can help believers to find "sound interpretations", while on the other it may also make available readings not based on so-called "sound traditions". However, another group may regard a rejected interpretation as correct and authoritative.

Although information taken from the Internet may sometimes be confusing for the outsider, this illustrates the complex nature of modern religious life. And from an academic point of view, it is of great benefit to be able to follow and analyse the countless variations of theological discussions that take place on the Internet. How theologians and "ordinary" believers go about trying to establish an interpretation or solve a practical problem is generally very difficult to follow in the real world. Thus, for researchers who are interested in analysing how religious traditions are transmitted, questioned and understood in a specific local context, the Internet is a source that offers important and fresh material. However, to be able to use this material, it is essential to develop new methods and theories for analysing religious activities on the Internet.

Ritual theories and community

In his classic work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) maintains that religion is essentially the foundation upon which society rests. To Durkheim religion is defined as:

> ... a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church... (Durkheim 1995: 44.)

In line with this definition, rituals are also viewed as essential parts and manifestations of the community and its practice. To Durkheim, rituals are consequently seen as rules of conduct that prescribe how humans must conduct themselves with sacred things (Durkheim 1995: 38). In sum, a religious system and its rites confirm society, and the society verifies the religious system and its rituals. From this point of view a community and its religion are in a symbiotic relationship with each other.

Even though Durkheim's is far from being alone in his attempt to define the essence of ritual, he is still one of the most important names in the study of religions and within the so-called functionalistic school of anthropology (cf. Zuesse 1987). To Durkheim and other analysts, such as Victor Turner (1920–83) and Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957), religion must be seen as the product of a society and its modalities. This perspective places great emphasis on the collective nature of humanity, but according to Luckmann modern man is set free from most of the bonds tying the individual to specific religious institutions, the community or the prevailing local context. Contrary to Durkheim, Luckmann argues that invisible religiosity is something set apart from the religious community and its institutions; it is rather the individual who creates his or her own religious outlook. According to this theory, people in the west have become liberated and autonomous in their relationship with religious institutions, which as a consequence seem to be of little or no importance for how the individual forms his or her identity. This theory could, of course, be questioned in many ways. Is it, for example, possible to liberate the individual from the collective? Can the dominating institutions be seen as autonomous from the prevailing local context, whether religious or secular?

Even though Luckmann discusses neither the globalisation process nor the new information and communication technologies, these developments have a bearing on the theories developed in *The Invisible Religion*. For example, both the globalisation process and the new information technologies make it easier and safer for the individual to formulate and live as he or she wants. Today, almost any way of finding meaning in life can be found on the Internet. These advances present new possibilities for seeking out and finding alternative ways to understand and question old "truths". Although the great majority of people seem to perceive this turn as positive, a growing number consider the same tendency to be negative or even evil, because it creates frustration, stress and uncertainty (Giddens 1999: 13). But it is also possible for a single person to have mixed emotions and feelings about the possibilities created by the new technologies.

As I have already argued, the development of new information and communication technologies has become an essential and vital part of the global economy (Castells 2001). Evidently this very same process has also affected cultural and religious provision. Today, for example, it is possible to find all kinds of food, music, films and religious worldviews in any large western city. If we compare the situation of today with the supply side of, say, ten or twenty years ago, it is clear that a dramatic shift has taken place. This change has not yet been thoroughly analysed or explained from the perspective of the study of religions. Contrary to the general hypothesis of secularisation, that is, that humans have lost their religious beliefs because of the modernisation process, analysts who adhere to the so-called

"rational choice school" argue that the growth of the supply side will make it possible for modern humans to find a religion to suit individual needs (cf. Young 1997). If this is correct, as I think it is, Luckmann's theory of invisible religion appears acceptable and challenging.

What about on-line rituals?

In relation to the development discussed above and Luckmann's theory of invisible religion, it is essential to ask how modern humans perform their rituals? Certainly this is a large and in many respects unanswerable question that could be developed along many different lines. In the following, I shall therefore focus solely on what I call on-line rituals. Since this is, to my knowledge, a new or at least rather recent term, it is essential to clarify what I mean by "on-line rituals". In using the term "on-line ritual" I shall be referring to a ritual (sacred or profane) performed in cyberspace and attended by participants who are linked to each other via computers communicating in real time (chat) or with a time delay (e-mail communication). In line with this definition, and in relation to the analysis of information and communication technologies, it is possible to distinguish between at least two different kinds of on-line religious rituals:

1) Rituals that could be linked to an established physical organisation, for example a Church or a temple.
2) Rituals with no link, or a weak link, to a physical and established organisation.

Irrespective of this typology, it is often difficult to make a clear distinction between the categories. The selection and interpretation made here depend on how we define the essence of a religion or a ritual, a question related to the academic problem of how to define religion and religiosity.

Generally, virtual rituals are characterised by a large degree of freedom and openness with respect to interpretation and flexibility. For example, if it is suggested that one should light a candle and the ritualist does not have one, it is possible to light a virtual candle. But in all rituals, it is the intention and expectation of rituals that count. From this point of view, there seem to be no difference between on-line and off-line rituals. However, in on-line rituals the speech act is replaced by, and transformed into, a written text (cf. O'Leary 1996). But the virtual milieu should not be seen as different from physical space. How a person reacts to an on-line ritual is therefore influenced by his or her off-line activities and cultural context. From this point of view, a researcher who wishes to analyse on-line rituals must pay attention to local and cultural variations and traditions. Thus it

is important to combine on-line research with traditional fieldwork, interviews and participant observation (Kendall 1999).

Even though there are important differences between off-line and on-line rituals, especially the lack of physical interface between the participants, religiosity articulated on the Internet must be seen as original and authentic in its own right. Stephen O'Leary even argues that it is important to invert the question and ask what participants gain by performing their rituals on-line.

> Certainly, important elements of traditional ritual are lost without physical presence; but perhaps we should invert the question. Rather than assuming preemptively that the loss of physical presence produces a ritual that is unreal or "empty," we might ask what ritual gains in the virtual environment and what meanings the participants are able to derive from these practices, such that they will gather again and again to perform cyber-rituals together while paying a premium fee for their connect time. (O'Leary 1996: 795.)

As mentioned before, most ritual theories seem to rest on the assumption that a ritual should be seen as an act or performance mirroring the basic values of a specific community, whether religious, cultural or political. If this presupposition is correct, as I think it is, it is important to ask whether it is possible for the Internet user to feel with other Internet surfers, even though they have never or rarely meet in person. This question is also important, since it is frequently said that the new information and communication technologies remove the possibility of establishing and creating feelings and emotions on-line. This way of putting the argument is often used to explain why, for example, pornography, racial discrimination and so-called sects are so wide spread on the Internet. Thus it is not individuals or even society that should be blamed, but the media. And if we want to solve the problem and create a better society, it will be necessary to restrict or ban the Internet. In their analysis of the media debate that followed the mass suicide that took place among the members of *Heaven's Gate* in 1997, Lorne Dawson and Jenna Hennebry (1999) noted exactly this mode of argument: it was the Internet that was both blamed and presented as an explanation for how such religious groups could persuade young people to commit suicide.

Even though most analysts regard the authentic off-line community as something very different from an on-line community, some writers, like Howard Rheingold, appear to think that on-line communication is no different from a genuine off-line *tête-à-tête*.

> People in virtual communities use words on screens to exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gos-

> sip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind. You can't kiss anybody and nobody can punch you in the nose, but a lot can happen within those boundaries. To the millions who have been drawn into it, the richness and vitality of computer-linked cultures is attractive, even addictive. (Rheingold 2001: 274.)

If Rheingold is correct, it is of course also possible for individuals to perform religious rituals on-line. Today, for example, a lot of religious, political and sexual minorities are using the new information and communication technologies to create feelings of community, identity and belonging, a fact that could be seen to support Rheingold's hypothesis about virtual communities (cf. Correll 1995; Larsson 2002). However, at the time of writing, this is a brand new field of academic exploration and research: the process of analysing the Internet from this kind of perspectives has just begun.

On-line rituals

In this section, two examples of on-line rituals will be analysed and discussed. Even though the selected *blot* and *dhikr* rituals are illustrative of on-line rituals, they should not be viewed as typical or representative of a general typology. Nonetheless, it is, for example, possible to describe them as asynchronic rituals: that is, there is a time delay involved in this type of computer-communicated ritual. Individuals therefore perform these two on-line rituals either by downloading information, in this case an audio file containing a *dhikr* ceremony, or by posting an electronic message, here to a Neo-pagan group to ask them to perform a *blot* ceremony. Compared with synchronic rituals, which are performed in real time in discussion rooms or chat milieus, the rituals involved here can all be performed whatever the time or place. From this point of view, theses examples can be straightforwardly linked to Thomas Luckmann's theory of invisible or private religion. Via a computer with a modem, the Internet surfer can easily, safely and privatly perform or listen to a ritual, even though he or she does not belong to or follow this specific tradition.

The first example is taken from the homepage of *The Order of Lidskjalf*. This site belongs to a Neo-pagan group founded in the city of Lund, Sweden, in 1990. The order, which focuses on late Iron-Age Scandinavian culture, especially the religious aspects of society, was first initiated by archaeology and history students at the university of Lund. The name, *Lidskjalf*, is taken from Norse mythology, and it is the name of Odin's watchtower in Asgård.

> Lidskjalf in the myths was the place in the fortress of Odin, where the whole world could be viewed. The order of Lidskjalf wishes to continue to see the past, present and future from a shared platform in our modern society. We feel that the sense of pride that comes from learning about cultural backgrounds in all forms is essential for the raising of new generations that are to become aware and truthful citizens. Lidskjalf urges people to take great pride in their history, but always respect the thoughts and existence of others. Though hate and anger often can be influential parts of human creativity, it's better to stand fast with a sober and critical mind than to lose oneself to naive ideas that bring us to the extremes of either xenophobia or political correctness. (http://www.algonet.se/~richjohn/lidskjalf/; 11.7.2002.)

The main aim of this group is to revitalise the Old Norse religion and bring back the pre-Christian culture that dominated Scandinavia before the rise of Christianity. In analysing this material, it would be comforting to think that Old Norse religion was different from our modern conceptions because of the time gap. Nevertheless, it is easy to find examples of how Old Norse rituals are being transformed and adapted by Neo-pagan groups to suit modern life (Larsson 2002: 84–85; Skott 2000). *Lidskjalf's* guestbook also illustrates how the new information and communication technologies can be used to support and help group members and potential supporters.

> I just would like to know, that how can I join a Viking religion group from Finland, and how can I meet some Finnish Vikings? I am lonely here, there's only two of us in my friend group who believe the real truth of Gods. (http://www.algonet.se/~richjohn/lidskjalf/; 11.7.2002.)

However, irrespective of physical distance or time, it is possible for everybody who visits the homepage of *Lindskjalf* to perform an on-line *blot*, a Viking sacrifice. The visitor is recommended to choose a sacrifice and to decide which god (Tor, Oden or Frej) to honour by selecting one of the following goods: mead, apples, seed, a pig, a cow, a horse, a thrall, a missionary, a prisoner, or something completely different. The reason for the sacrifice should also be mentioned in the electronic message posted to the group.

The on-line *blot* illustrates clearly that individuals have great freedom to modify sacrifices to suit their own purposes and to develop a rite in line with their particular worldviews. From the variety of goods it is possible, for example, to perform a vegetarian *blot*, which was very likely uncommon or at least unusual among the Vikings. The fact that one may sacrifice a missionary also illustrates that many Neo-pagan groups are negative or even hostile to the Christian Church and to Christianity in general (cf. Skott 2000).

My second example is taken from a Muslim *sufi* homepage belonging to the *Naqshbandi* Order under the direction of Shaykh Hisham Kabbani, the Grand Mufti Muhammad Nazim al-Haqqani's representative in America. According to Garbi Schmidt, this Naqshbandi congregation is one of the most active sufi-groups on the Internet (Schmidt 2001: 227). Even though the second example belongs to another religion with different traditions, it also illustrates how Muslims, too, are using the information technologies to spread information about religion on a global basis. On this homepage, for example, it is possible to download and listen to a *dhikr* ceremony, an esoteric rite originally only obtainable by initiated members, but now available with detailed information to anyone with a computer. From this point of view, this *Naqshbandi* homepage (there are of course several homepages belonging to the *Naqshbandi* tradition) seems to illustrate a new kind of openness, a change perhaps brought about by the new technology.

The Islamic term *dhikr* means literally the remembrance, recollection or mention of one of Allah's ninety-nine names or formulae, like "God is Most Great" (*Allahu Akbar*). By repeating this or another of God's names or formulae over and over again, the Islamic mystic obtains esoteric insight or higher knowledge about Islam. In a technical sense, a *dhikr* rite could also be described as a litany. The *dhikr* could also be performed according to different norms and rules (for example, in a high or low voice), and there are many local variations (cf. Netton 1997). There are, for example, groups that do not allow the *dhikr* to be performed with music or movements, while others, like the whirling dervishes, actually perform a ritual dance as a central part of their *dhikr* ceremony.

Together with the downloadable *dhikr* ceremony, one can also obtain detailed and transcribed information about every step in the rite. Even though this information is basic, it contains vital information on every *maqama* (the mystical stages embodied in the ritual), as well as how many times a section should be repeated. The homepage also gives detailed information on the *Naqshbandis* and their way of performing the *dhikr*, important information for comparison with other groups.

Even though both rituals provide us with important information about the religious and ritual supply side on the Internet, we still do not know how these homepages are used or understood by individuals. To be able to say something about this aspect, it is necessary to combine Internet research with traditional interviews and participant observation. Nonetheless, on-line rituals located on the Internet should not be neglected in the modern academic study of religions; on the contrary, this is one of the most important aspects of modern religiosity.

Conclusions

In sum, the new technology is a powerful tool that makes it possible for the believer to remain anonymous, invisible or private in his or her search for religious truths. On the one hand, the on-line rituals chosen could all be seen as clear illustrations of a private form of religiosity. On the other hand, it seems that the new information technologies have also created new possibilities for establishing communities, that is, virtual communities cut off from time or physical space. Even though the whole idea of virtual community must be analysed more thoroughly and illustrated with further empirical data before it can be carefully used, this type of community appears to be different from pre-modern forms. From this point of view, modern on-line rituals appear to depend on a new kind of community, a community very different from the church-oriented religion that Luckmann discusses and describes in his work on invisible or private religion.

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