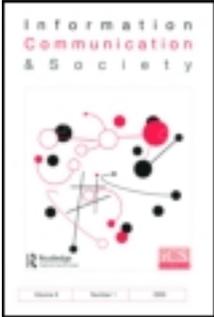


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On: 03 November 2011, At: 13:57

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH,
UK



Information, Communication & Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rics20>

IN THEIR OWN IMAGE?

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Available online: 19 Jul 2011

To cite this article: Ineke Noomen, Stef Aupers & Dick Houtman (2011): IN THEIR OWN IMAGE?, Information, Communication & Society, DOI:10.1080/1369118X.2011.597415

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2011.597415>



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Ineke Noomen, Stef Aupers & Dick Houtman

IN THEIR OWN IMAGE?

Catholic, Protestant and holistic spiritual appropriations of the Internet

This article relies on in-depth qualitative interviews with 21 web designers, active in the fields of Catholicism, Protestantism and holistic spirituality in the Netherlands, to study religious appropriations of the Internet. The authors found that these different religious groups embraced the medium of the Internet motivated by a common desire to make oneself heard in the cacophony of voices that has resulted from processes of secularization and religious change. In doing so, Catholic web designers struggle with the dilemma of either following Roman orthodoxy or creating room for dialogue and diversity, whereas their Protestant counterparts feel forced to either let a thousand flowers bloom or surrender to a highly compromised image of their faith. Holistic spirituality, finally, struggles with neither of these problems and appropriates the Internet as its virtually natural habitat for sharing and connecting. The authors conclude that, consistent with theories about cultured technology and spiritualizing of the Internet, offline religious heritages matter a lot when religions seek to appropriate the Internet through web design. These appropriations tend not to be smooth transpositions of coherent and conflict-free offline religious heritages to online environments, however, but conflict-ridden processes stirring long-standing struggles over authority and identity.

Keywords religion and Internet; online—offline; computer-mediated communication

(Received 30 August 2010; final version received 10 June 2011)

Introduction

The notion that modern technology and religion are incompatible, because – in sociologist of religion Wilson's (1976, p. 88) words – 'technology is itself the

encapsulation of human rationality' and because 'the instrumentalism of rational thinking is powerfully embodied in machines', has long been a social-scientific mainstay. The implication of this notion that religion will inevitably suffer from encounters with technology has meanwhile been challenged by historical studies demonstrating that the two have in fact often developed in tandem (e.g. Davis 2004 [1998]; Noble 1999 [1997]) and that their potential for peaceful coexistence has become even more evident since the emergence and widespread religious use of the Internet since the 1990s.

Well-established religious traditions such as Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam have proliferated online to communicate their messages, just like neo-pagans, witches and others, who identify with the field of holistic spirituality, do. Going online is, however, by no means an automatic thing to do for religious groups and it is moreover unlikely that the Internet means the same to all of them, irrespective of their historical particularities, national backgrounds and other offline features. In this article, we therefore study how the Internet is dealt with in the Dutch Catholic, Protestant and spiritual holistic milieus and, more specifically, what dilemmas and struggles each of these encounters in appropriating it. Such a study is particularly relevant for debates about the social and cultural shaping of technology in general (e.g. MacKenzie & Wajcman 1999 [1985]) and the religious shaping of the Internet in particular (Campbell 2005a).

After an elaboration of the relevance of our study (Section 2) and a description of the context of the Dutch religious and media landscape (Section 3), we study in empirical detail how web designers in the three aforementioned religious fields understand the Internet and what problems and dilemmas they encounter in its appropriation. We conclude with a summary and discussion of our principal findings (Section 5).

Religion online and offline

From technological determinism to cultured technology

Since the 1990s, religion and the Internet has become a hotly debated field. The earliest studies still breathed utopian views of cyberspace, which got imputed with all kinds of spiritual and liberating qualities (Turkle 1995; Dery 1996; Wertheim 1999; Karaflogka 2003; Brasher 2004 [2001]; Davis 2004 [1998]; O'Leary 2004 [1996]; Aupers & Houtman 2005; Bittarello 2008). It was often portrayed as an otherworldly realm in and of itself – as a 'paradise' (Stenger 1992 [1991], p. 52), 'new Jerusalem' (Benedikt 1992 [1991], p. 14), 'metaphysical' (Heim 1993) or a 'technological substitute of the Christian space of heaven' (Wertheim 1999, p. 16). Other scholars conducted quite empirical and descriptive case studies of online religions, in particular those exotic breeds that were back then

assumed to be bound to become substitutes for traditional offline types of religion (Brasher 2004 [2001]; O'Leary 2004 [1996]; Karaflogka 2003).

These early studies that emphasized the transformative powers of the Internet, or even considered cyberspace a spiritual place in and of itself, generally had a marked technologically deterministic flavour. Even where offline religious traditions were considered, it was postulated that 'the question is not whether but how and when religious traditions and religious organizations will change and be changed by involvement in the online world' (Brasher 2004 [2001], p. 13). More recent studies on religion and the Internet typically break with such technologically deterministic assumptions, and instead focus on the active appropriation of the new technologies within various religious groups. This means that scholars are less focused on the question how new cyber-religions 'naturally' or 'inevitably' emerge online, and more often study the particular ways in which established religious groups handle new Internet technologies, how they put these into use and how they incorporate these into previously established practices (e.g. Dawson & Cowan 2004; Højsgaard & Warburg 2005; Ess *et al.* 2007). Inspired by computer-mediated communication studies and science and technology studies, it has furthermore become common practice to emphasize the importance of offline contexts for understanding how religion manifests itself online. It is argued that long-standing religious traditions like Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam have their roots in the offline world and because of that differ markedly in their understandings and appropriations of online environments. Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005) use the idea of 'cultured technology' to communicate this insight that 'cultures modify technologies and endow them with a communal context' (p. 26), whereas Campbell (2005a) has developed the more specific notion of 'spiritualizing the Internet' to emphasize that different religious traditions speak, think and act fundamentally differently when it comes to the Internet (Campbell 2010).

Comparing religious traditions online

Although these new approaches call for empirical studies aimed at comparing whether and how different religious traditions appropriate the Internet in different ways, such studies are still remarkably rare and tend to remain theoretically underdeveloped. Two shortcomings are particularly important.

First, a large part of the otherwise relevant studies are one-shot case studies. Examples are studies on Islam and the Internet (Bunt 2000, 2003), online Christian communities (Campbell 2005b) and modern pagans on the Internet (Cowan 2005) – studies that raise all important theoretical issues about the prominent role of religious authority (e.g. Barker 2005), identity (e.g. Lövheim 2004; Berger & Ezzy 2009) and community online for the particular religious movement they address. Yet, because these are one-shot case studies, their findings cannot reveal whether and how the types of appropriations of the Internet

that are found are actually typical for the religious tradition at hand or apply more generally.

Second, there are studies that do compare different strains of religion on the Internet, but these have often focused on describing similarities rather than explaining differences. Kluver and Cheong (2007), for example, have studied the understandings and uses of the Internet by six different religious traditions in Singapore (i.e. Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Taoism, Buddhism and Hinduism) to find out 'how different religious communities appropriate technology differently' (p. 1126). In the end, however, they draw conclusions about the general compatibility of religion and the Internet, thus disregarding – as they generously admit themselves (p. 1139) – the question they initially set out to answer, i.e. whether and how different religious dispositions yield different outcomes online. Likewise, Cheong and Poon (2008) compare Christian and Buddhist organizations on the Internet and draw general conclusions about the relation between (religious) social capital and technology that are not so much flawed, but do not relate to their initial ambition to flesh out the differences between both.

Given these studies' explicit embracement of the cultured technology approach, according to which different religious cultures yield different appropriations of the Internet, their focus on similarities rather than differences is utterly problematic, because this leaves the vital theoretical issue basically unaddressed. Therefore, in this paper, we follow the lead of the few comparative studies that do actually focus on these differences in a systematic way (e.g. Jacobs 2007; Campbell 2010). Whereas Campbell (2010) has recently made a valuable contribution by systematically comparing Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the 'three dominant monotheistic faiths' (p. 6), in this paper we compare the two dominant strains of Christian religion in the Netherlands, Catholicism and Protestantism, with the field of holistic spirituality. We do so because the latter differs in striking ways from either of these two in terms of its understandings of religious community, religious authority and religious texts (Campbell 2010). To enable a meaningful interpretation of our interview data, we start with a description of the context of the Dutch religious and media landscapes and how these have historically come into being.

Religion and media in the Netherlands

In the past half-century, processes of secularization and commercialization of the broadcasting media have – even apart from the emergence of the Internet – caused major changes in the religious and media landscapes in the Netherlands. Due to secularization, Catholics and Protestants have lost much of their former television airtime and smooth access to newspaper audiences in this period, which has also witnessed a major increase in the number of non-religious

persons, alongside the rise and spread of holistic spirituality as a new religious competitor to the Christian churches.

The Dutch religious and media landscape

Until well into the 1960s, the Dutch system of ‘pillarization’ (Dutch: *verzuiling*), a type of societal organization peculiar to the Netherlands back then, was still firmly in place. It consisted of a handful of vertically arranged religious and political segments, or ‘pillars’ (Dutch: *zuilen*), that existed side by side, with people identifying with only one of these throughout most of their lives. This system of pillarization has deeply affected the religious, political and media landscapes of Dutch society. Catholics and Protestants had their own newspapers and broadcasting organizations that catered to their own people and depended on the size of their constituencies for airtime and financial resources. When processes of secularization sparked a process of ‘de-pillarization’ (Dutch: *ontzuiling*) in the 1960s, new religious and non-religious competitors gained ground, which has made it more difficult for the Christian churches to cater to the religious needs of their crumbled constituencies (Dekker & Ester 1996). Since the 1980s, moreover, the increased importance of ratings and the introduction of commercial television in 1989 have led to an even further decline in airtime for Catholic and Protestant broadcasting organizations.

The consequences of the process of de-pillarization since the 1960s are basically twofold, then. On the one hand, the Christian churches now need to compete with new, secular ideologies and with newly emerged and less institutionalized holistic spirituality. While the guaranteed mass media access that Catholics and Protestants once enjoyed has strongly declined, this same decline has ironically strengthened their felt needs to make themselves heard among the cacophony of secular and religious voices that has resulted. Even though holistic spirituality has in the past never experienced the luxury of having its ‘own’ national newspaper or broadcasting organization, this urge is also found in the holistic milieu, as we will see. As such, the emergence of the Internet in the 1990s has filled a significant media gap for each of these three religious groups.

Catholicism, Protestantism and holistic spirituality in the Netherlands

Dutch Catholicism, Protestantism and holistic spirituality have all developed in a unique fashion that reflects Dutch culture and history. Catholicism, to begin with, was most profoundly influenced by the process of secularization in the Netherlands over the last decades: in 1966 about 35 per cent of the population was still a member of the Catholic church, whereas this had been reduced to only 16 per cent in 2006 (Bernts *et al.* 2007, p. 14). Looking at developments within the tradition itself, it is important to note that the Dutch Catholic church

province, particularly in comparison to its South and Mid-European counterparts, is renowned for its critical stance towards Roman hierarchy, orthodoxy and authority. As such, many Dutch Catholics welcomed the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s that marked the onset of an age of *aggiornamento* that promised to modernize traditional Catholic teachings and placed an emphasis on openness and dialogue. Many Dutch Catholics (and non-Catholics alike) deplored the waning of this progressive pontifical policy later on, with discontents reaching a climax during the visit of Pope John Paul II to the Netherlands in 1985. Yet, there have of course always been more orthodox Catholics in the Netherlands too, who are quite critical of the calls for openness and dialogue by their progressive counterparts. Despite the Catholic Church's theologically informed aim of uniting the global community of Catholic believers, then, polarization between a more progressive and a more orthodox wing has always existed in Dutch Catholicism.

Although Protestantism proved to be less vulnerable to the powers of secularization than Catholicism in the Netherlands, its church membership declined from 25 per cent of the population in 1966 to 14 per cent in 2006 (Bernts *et al.* 2007). Moreover, the history of Dutch Protestantism is characterized by innumerable conflicts and schisms motivated by theological disputes, because Protestantism, unlike Catholicism, emphasizes believers' individual relationships with God. In the Netherlands, this has sparked a proliferation of competing theological interpretations and a fragmentation of Dutch Protestantism into numerous congregations and churches. The largest branch of Dutch Protestantism concerns the PKN (Protestant Church in the Netherlands), which is a coalition of Reformed (Dutch: *Hervormd*), Dutch Reformed (Dutch: *Gereformeerd*) and Lutheran (Dutch: *Luthers*) churches, comprising about 1800 congregations with liberal, mainline as well as conservative outlooks. After decades of exploratory and non-obligatory alliances, this coalition was finally settled in 2004, leaving ample room for difference and religious diversity, yet still being rejected by many (particularly more orthodox) Protestant churches that hence refused to join. The Protestant Church in the Netherlands characterizes itself as a church 'in unity and variety' (Protestantse Kerk in Nederland 2005, p. 7) and a 'community centered on the Word' (p. 6). Although declining church attendance and church membership is naturally a major concern to the Protestant churches, they nonetheless appear to feel less challenged by contemporary religious and ideological pluralism than the Catholic Church does, because this is very much the type of situation in which they have historically always found themselves. Religious pluralism is virtually a natural condition for Dutch Protestants.

Finally, holistic spirituality has emerged as a new competitor on the religious market and it flourishes particularly in the most secularized countries of Europe, such as France, Great Britain, Sweden and the Netherlands (e.g. Houtman & Aupers 2007). Holistic spirituality became prominent in the Netherlands in

the 1960s when the first New Age centers were established in Amsterdam (Aupers 2005) and nowadays somewhere between 8 per cent (Bernts *et al.* 2007, p. 164) and 25 per cent (Kronjee & Lampert 2006, p. 184) of the Dutch population is affiliated with this type of spirituality. Instead of sharing loyalty to a particular religious body of thought, holistic spirituality is based on the notion that all religious traditions are man-made constructions that at bottom all refer to the same underlying spiritual core. This notion of ‘perennialism’ (Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996) implies a strong receptivity towards a broad range of spiritual and religious traditions, with regard to which individuals are seen as free to choose their own spiritual paths. This explains why New Age and holistic spirituality have been characterized as a ‘cultic milieu’ (Luckmann 1996; Campbell 2002 [1972]) – a loose network that comprises all kinds of small organizations and single-person businesses providing spiritual workshops, courses, therapies, books and art. With the rapid expansion of this cultic milieu over the last decades, holistic spirituality became a sizable and significant component of the Dutch religious landscape.

Research design and data collection

We base ourselves in this article on an analysis of in-depth qualitative interviews with twenty-one web designers who – either professionally or on a voluntary basis – work in the Dutch Catholic, Protestant or spiritual milieus. Since we aim to unravel how the Internet is received and dealt with in these milieus, we have strategically chosen to focus our study on religious web designers, because they work at the junctions of these religious milieus and the Internet. They are as it were mediators, who typically work in organizational contexts in which they find themselves faced with competing ideas, demands and conflicts regarding the purposes, contents, functionalities and visual outlooks of the websites they are working on. As such, they provide us with an excellent source of data for our study of religious appropriations of the Internet where these processes most decisively take place: in the minds and hands of the people who build the religious websites that Internet users eventually find themselves confronted with.

Nine of our interviewees are engaged with the Catholic field. Three of these are directly professionally affiliated with the Catholic Church in the Netherlands (Hendrikjan, Jeroen and Sanne) and two are priests involved with Internet projects (Martijn and Stephan). Two others work for the broadcasting organization that accommodates the Dutch Catholic Church’s official website, KRO/RKK (Alex and Bas). Richard was formerly involved with KRO/RKK as well, but is now preoccupied with an ecumenical web project of Catholic and Protestant churches. This leaves one web designer who is professionally unaffiliated with the Church and hosts one of the largest and most successful Dutch websites on Catholicism (Jan).

Because the Protestant milieu is more fragmented, with multiple religious organizations and media companies, the six web designers in this field are less easy to pin down. Connie works for the PKN, Klaas is involved in a Protestant website initiated by a cluster of Protestant organizations, Emma is professionally affiliated with the liberal Protestant broadcasting organization IKON and Mark is involved with a foundation that closely relates to the Liberal Protestants in the Netherlands. Two interviewees in this field do not work for Protestant organizations: one used to host the website of a large Protestant church in Utrecht (Henry) and another works for a small-scale media company that builds websites for non-profit religious, cultural and ideological organizations (Dirk). The latter has worked with organizations from different religious currents, but is now involved with a large Protestant web project for PKN.

Finally, our six interviewees in the field of holistic spirituality (Annemarie, Caroline, Daan, Erwin, Patrick and Ronald) are typically part of small-scale cooperative networks and mostly own their own businesses in spirituality. Because of this, they mostly host more than one website for the different projects they are involved in.

The in-depth interviews had a relatively open character to fully capture the worldviews of our respondents while it was simultaneously insured that particular, theoretically relevant topics were addressed in each interview (cf. Charmaz 2006, pp. 28–35). These ‘topics of conversation’ were mainly related to the religious appropriation of the Internet: they comprised the aims and aspirations that made the various religious groups decide to go online, the meanings religious groups attribute to the Internet compared with other media, the main objectives, target groups, opportunities and problems of the religious websites and considerations regarding the choice for (or against) particular functionalities or graphics in web design. In addition, respondents’ websites were thoroughly explored before the interview, so as to be able to ask detailed questions about their features. All interviews (except for one, which took place over telephone) were conducted face-to-face in the period between September 2008 and April 2009 by the first author. On average, interviews lasted for about an hour and a half. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and all quotations used in this paper have been translated from Dutch by the first author. Respondents have been given fictitious names so as to safeguard their privacy.

Religious dilemmas in appropriating the Internet

Because going online is by no means a ‘natural’ thing to do, we first discuss how the Dutch pluralized religious and media landscapes have led the various religious and spiritual groups to embrace the Internet. We then explore the problems and dilemmas the interviewed web designers find themselves confronted with and

how these stem from typical offline features and conflicts that characterize the respective religious fields.

The web as a last media resort

All religious groups under study face the difficulty of insufficient television airtime and access to newspaper audiences. Richard, who works in the Catholic confines, explains that ‘previously we of course had Catholic newspapers and the like (. . .), but well, these are practically all gone’ and infers that ‘right now the Internet is the only channel left through which the church can directly address an audience’. In a similar vein, holistic web designer Patrick had been striving for a programme on national television, which proved, however, very difficult to accomplish. For him as well, the web has become an attractive alternative for sharing his ideas, since ‘through the Internet I could still reach my audience!’ In this way, the Internet virtually serves as a ‘last resort’ to all religious groups under study – as the only viable option left to them if they want to make themselves heard.

In contrast with the traditional mass media, moreover, the Internet is quite hospitable to small groups addressing niche audiences. Broadcasts for highly specific audiences can no longer be afforded in national programming, but can easily be offered online. Hendrikjan explains how church topics ‘that bite the dust again and again’ in national programming can easily be ‘transmitted through the Internet and [are] watched very well’. Bas, who works at the Internet department of the Dutch Catholic channel, gives the example of their bimonthly online broadcasts of the Pope’s Wednesday’s general audiences and his Angelus prayers on Sundays. ‘[W]e would say that it is not expedient to broadcast it on television. But there is an audience for this, and that’s why we offer it through the Internet’, Bas explains, concluding that this ‘certainly caters for a need’. Similarly, a recent Dutch newspaper article reports a boom of orthodox Protestant radio stations on the Internet, serving groups that ‘are lacking their own news, opinion and music at the national channels’ (Visscher 2010). It concludes that the web enables programme makers to ‘make their own choices’ regarding the Christian music, church news, psalms and organ concerts they want to broadcast, ‘[w]ithout interference of a public net manager’ or non-Christian music or advertising ‘being imposed’ upon them.

The experienced lack of viable media alternatives stems from a strong motivation to make oneself heard in the cacophony of secular and religious voices that already exists online. This is because respondents from all three fields, even though they express it somewhat differently, conceive of the Internet as a stage where sometimes highly idiosyncratic or over-simplified thoughts, opinions and dissatisfactions are disseminated. Emma, for example, speaks of ‘very scary weblogs, indeed about people who tell you with red-hot flames when the end of the world is near’ and Hendrikjan notices ‘people who, well,

do really weird things' online and 'all kinds of evil sites'. Quite similar to these two respondents, who work in the Protestant and Catholic domains, respectively, Erwin, who works in the field of holistic spirituality, speaks of 'that negativity on the Internet (. . .) all kinds of excesses which are there', available 'only through one mouse click'. Considerations such as these do not cause religious groups to avoid the web, but actually give them paramount reason to counterbalance these voices in the Internet 'jungle' (Bas) by providing reliable information or statements of a more positive kind. Emma argues that the church should realize that it 'needs to put a balanced answer up against this, on a site that looks professional, of which people think "oh, this has authority" . . .'. Martijn reasons that the Catholic Church should 'put [its] own stall' in this 'large market, where there are all kinds of stalls', because otherwise 'everyone can be found out there, except for the church'. In a similar fashion, Erwin explains that he has made a number of websites only to 'show positive messages and beautiful things: nice pictures, nice texts', 'purely to just put positive things on the Internet'. Unlike Emma and Martijn, he is part of the spiritual milieu and as such not constrained by any organizational authority structure, yet understands it as his personal responsibility to counterbalance content that contradicts his personal values and ideals.

In sum, people from distinct religious fields experience a need to provide web users with 'reliable' religious or spiritual content, because they are well aware of the everyday significance of the Internet as a source of information, communication and entertainment nowadays. As we will see, however, this consensus about the importance of the Internet does not mean that its religious appropriation is an easy process. Quite the contrary: each tradition faces its own typical dilemmas and struggles in appropriating and culturalizing the Internet through web design.

Catholic struggles with authority

The pluralism of the Dutch religious landscape poses more of a challenge to Catholics than to either Protestants or those who identify with the spiritual milieu. This is because Catholicism is historically and theologically a monopolistic creed, the aim of which has always been to unite a global community of believers representing God's Kingdom on earth, which now finds itself in decline and faces an increase in pluralism – in the Netherlands even more so than elsewhere. Referring to this situation, priest and web maker Martijn therefore claims that 'the church as an institute that provides meaning' is only 'one party in a competitive market', a view that is shared by independent Catholic web designer Jan, who conceives of Catholicism as 'one of the parties on the reli market'.

The notion that the Catholic community and identity are under threat is virtually omnipresent in Dutch Catholicism and the Internet is understood as a means

that may help to counter this problem (Campbell 2005a). Jeroen, initiator of a Catholic news site, wants to ‘show what [is] going on in the Church’, intending to ‘stimulate the self-awareness of Catholics’. Likewise, Alex aims to ‘make people more conscious of our values’ and to demonstrate that Catholicism concerns ‘a tradition that ain’t frozen, but one that still lives on and constantly gets reinterpreted’. Such a rejuvenation of Catholic identity, moreover, is experienced as a necessary basis for more encompassing missionary goals put forward in Pontifical documents that designate modern media like the Internet as “gifts of God” which, in accordance with His providential design, unite men in brotherhood and so help them to cooperate with His plan for their salvation’ (Second Vatican Council 1971, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_23051971_communio_en.html; see also Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2002, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_ethics-internet_en.html). Our respondents express a similar emphasis on the need for a shared Catholic identity. ‘[I]f you want to survive as a church, then you need that clear identity again’, Stephan argues, and Sanne explains that the Catholic youth forum she is involved with aims to ‘make [youngsters] surer of themselves’ so that ‘we’ll get a larger group of Catholics who know how to stand their ground, and then you have people to go and face the world’.

Reaching out to a mixed audience of adherents and potential believers through the Internet, however, also demands reflection on and redefinition of ‘who we are’, ‘what we believe in’ and ‘what we stand for’. Questions such as these invoke contrasting ideas about what exactly constitutes – or rather: *should* constitute – this Catholic identity nowadays and how it should be articulated on the web. On the one hand, there are quite orthodox voices that try to transpose church authority, tradition and hierarchy onto the Internet by way of regulation and control of online information, whereas on the other hand there are more progressive pleas for openness and dialogue.

One way to accomplish control over online information is the use of a strict linking policy, of which the Vatican website, which lacks any web links to external websites, is a paramount example. Hendrikjan, a Dutch Catholic Church official, recounts how this issue has caused ‘quite some discussions’ when starting the official website of the Catholic Church in the Netherlands. To avoid bringing in ‘organizations that you’re rather not associated with’, they decided ‘after long talks’ to link only to websites ‘for which we can take responsibility ourselves’. Martijn gives another example, when he tells about his participation in an ecumenical Catholic–Protestant foundation that had been registering Dutch religious domain names in the early stages of the Internet. Its aim was to avoid these domain names falling into the hands of the so-called ‘domain grabbers’ and to assure that these web domains would lead only to ‘what we judge is good information’, which, however, caused disputes with Christian organizations that wanted to use these domain names.

Contrary to such initiatives, Richard, who is also active in Dutch Catholicism, rather feels that ‘people [should be allowed] to exercise their personal responsibility’, because it ‘would really not be a good thing’ if the church was in a position to control the information supply. Jan recounts how contrasting ideas about how to handle online information have even hindered online cooperation between Dutch Catholic organizations: ‘the main current was conservative’ and proposed to work out ‘a traffic light system to indicate the reliability of Catholic information’, whereas he himself ‘really was not into that’. Hence, this consortium fell apart ‘because there were too many different opinions on how one should manage this on the Internet’. Jan personally holds the view that the Internet ‘really works democratizing’ and firmly believes that ‘that’s the way it works: if I don’t find it here, I might find it there, or elsewhere, or hold my own opinion about it’.

To sum up, the traditional dilemma of Dutch Catholicism of either ‘conservatively’ holding on to church authority or ‘progressively’ providing opportunities for dialogue, diversity and openness is revived in the dilemmas faced by web designers who need to make decisions about the functionalities, web links and contents of Catholic websites.

Communicating a fragmented Protestant belief

The fragmented nature of the Dutch Protestant landscape seems at first sight to fit the Internet quite well, because it provides each of its often small congregations with a means to communicate its own message to its adherents as well as to a broader audience of potential believers. Next to Evangelical Protestant groups that are quite successful in communicating their beliefs to new audiences in religiously pluralistic contexts (see, for example, Smith *et al.* (1998) on American Evangelicalism and Roeland (2009) on Evangelicalism in the Netherlands), there are Liberal Protestants without any missionary goals who use the web primarily as an ‘important informative site for materials, a range of ideas, texts, etcetera’ that ‘provides people within a tenth of a second with information about something they want to know’ (Mark), thus using it as a tool to find and exchange information of all sorts (Campbell 2010, p. 26). Even orthodox Calvinist congregations that condemn media like television for its opportunities for entertainment and its role in distracting believers from more important things have quite easily found their ways online. Through their own websites, these orthodox Protestant groups serve their adherents with highly specific media menus, adapted to their respective moral standards and interests.

The Internet thus provides Protestant organizations of quite different sorts with a convenient platform to serve their specific audiences. The presence of the web, however, also challenges Protestant groups to present themselves in a unified manner to a lay audience that is typically ignorant of this internal diversity. Several of our respondents are responsible for representing the PKN, or

mainline Protestantism generally, online, and they unanimously characterize this as a difficult task because of the differences between various Protestant churches.

Dirk, who designs websites for various religious groups and ideological organizations and is currently involved with an all-embracing PKN Protestant web project, discloses that ‘it wasn’t as easy as one would think to choose the words (...) to indeed create a sort of collective appearance’, characterizing it as ‘a very, very vulnerable balance that one needs to find’. Connie, an employee at PKN, also underscores the difficulties that stem from conflicting religious interests and identities. When talking about a collective representation of the Protestant church online, she states: ‘that’s what *we* would like, but the congregations, they couldn’t care less. They have their own particular character’. Klaas, moreover, hosting a general, informative website about Dutch Protestantism and aiming to represent ‘the breadth of Protestantism’, experiences similar difficulties with Protestantism’s fragmented nature:

It’s not my point to represent ‘the churches.’ Because if the website was meant to represent *the* Protestant church, then I could forget it! Then there would be quite many pulling out immediately, saying: but I won’t be a party to that!

This gave rise to a strictly informative website, without any religious or missionary aspirations, that explains the different standpoints and views within the Dutch Protestant reach. It hence proves much easier in the broader Protestant field to offer ‘clean’ information or technological and organizational facilities online than to present substantial religious content, because the latter is almost inevitably contested and bound up with religious conflicts and theological disputes.

A Protestant struggle of a different kind concerns the strongly visual character of Internet culture. As a mainly text-based creed, (non-Evangelical) Protestant groups appear less conscious of their visual presentation than their Catholic and holistic spiritual counterparts, yielding quite some difficulties for web designers in this field. Mark claims that for him it was a ‘conscious choice’ to create a text-dominated homepage, so as to ‘immediately confront people with content’ and in a similar vein Conny confines her visual design to a ‘nice picture’ to go with the text, but ‘nothing more’. Yet, others feel that their websites need to be visually attractive to reach a yet uninvolved public. Emma and Dirk, both professional web designers who have also worked in other religious fields, in particular stress the importance of a visually attractive website in the online market and explain how difficult this actually is in a strongly text-based religious tradition like Protestantism.

Emma, who has previously been working for a Catholic organization, explains that it is very difficult to ‘visualize’ Protestantism, because it ‘lacks any rituals and images, no pictures of Mary, no saints and the like’. She advocates ‘visually modern’ religious websites (‘So, not like, “well, OK, we put an image

of our church building on it, and that's it") and Dirk holds the same view, critiquing Protestant websites that portray 'pale clergymen' or 'the interior of a church holding just four people'. Just like Emma, he thinks the Protestant church should create a more 'modern' and 'contemporary' look of itself, a process in which it has so far only taken the first few small steps according to him. Protestantism's internal fragmentation and its uneasiness and lack of familiarity with the predominantly visual culture of the Internet yield major problems and dilemmas for Protestant attempts to appropriate the Internet, in short.

Holistic spirituality: sharing and connecting through the web

Apart from typical hesitations relating to people's distraction from their offline everyday lives, or the distortion of fields of spiritual energy by computer radiation (both echoes of holistic spirituality's fears of alienation by modern technology), there are hardly any contestations about the use of the Internet in the field of holistic spirituality, particularly in comparison to the Catholic and Protestant milieus. The dominant view in the field of holistic spirituality is that the Internet gives groups and individuals ample room to voice their critiques of modern society and its dominant culture, and provides them with a platform to connect, share their ideas and reach out to others.

As such, the web designers in this field view the Internet as an apt environment for disseminating spiritual ideas and selling their products and services. Most of them run their own spiritual businesses and consequently do not have to communicate ideas on behalf of larger organizations or religious traditions, like most web designers in the Catholic and Protestant fields need to do.

Annemarie, who hosts several websites on spiritual matters and who sells her spiritual books through these too, explains how much she enjoys that through these websites she can 'live [her] passion' and 'just disseminate the things I want to share'. Similarly, Caroline uses her website as an outlet for her spiritual art work, for providing information about related joint projects and for her work as a therapist. As such, she understands her website as representing her personal spiritual identity ('at once you're showing: "this is me!") and she realizes that 'this is what I stand for; this is what I have on offer'. Rather than expressing a shared religious identity, those involved hence use the web to channel their personal views and practices, while at the same time intending to inspire their online visitors and stimulate them in their personal development. Caroline, for instance, explains that on her website she puts forward that 'it is possible to communicate with elemental beings' and 'that the world consists of energy' in order to 'wake people up' and 'give them that nourishment'. Consistent with this, various neo-pagan authors have celebrated the web as 'an incredible resource' (Nightmare 2001, p. 42), 'a beautiful

chaos (...) where anyone can share anything' (Penczak 2001, p. 253) and 'an endless source of sustenance' (Curott 2001, p. 17).

Using the web as a platform for sharing and connecting, then, feels almost like a natural thing to do for those involved here, and it hardly causes the types of struggles and dilemmas faced by Catholic and Protestant web designers. They often design their online spaces in such a way as to help others to share their ideas and experiences, and sell their products and services too. '[E]verything is aimed at this exchange', Daan claims, 'and the website is of course ideal for that, right?'. Ronald likewise created 'a platform where people can respond to each other's statements', explaining that 'in this way discussions and networks will arise and things will get connected' and adding that 'that actually is what the Internet very much is intended for at the moment'.

Ronald is an example of someone who has designed what he calls a 'spiritual marketplace' on one of his websites, where spiritual providers are invited to advertise their products and services. Unlike the Catholics who try to control online information, Ronald does 'not [want] to make any judgments about soundness' with regard to the healers, mediums, therapists and coaches who make use of this service. He does not want to 'deliver any warranty of quality' either, because 'it's not up to us to give a value judgment'. Annemarie, who is involved in an online spiritual radio station with an online forum for its listeners, explains that 'we want to offer a platform, and that doesn't have to mean that we agree with it. Because exactly spirituality is just something so individual'.

All in all, the Internet is appreciated in holistic spiritual circles as a platform for sharing spiritual wisdom and connecting to others to enrich people's spiritual lives. What is more, the web's visual culture is in striking accordance with holistic spirituality's marked focus on intuitive knowing and spiritual experience. Ronald, for example, stresses the importance of the 'look and feel' of his websites and Patrick claims that 'images provide a much nicer way (...) to take in information'. As such, and in contrast to typical Protestant understandings, spiritual messages need not much be understood, but rather experienced.

Conclusion

Now that the Internet has come to pervade the lives of almost all people in the West, and now that its use increasingly appears practical and profane rather than liberating or otherworldly, the focus in Internet studies has shifted to understanding online practices as embedded in offline routines and values and it is, for example, held that offline-based aspirations need to be taken into account in order to understand online participation in virtual communities (Slater 2002; Bakardjieva 2003; De Koster 2010). In the study of religion and the Internet, these pleas have resulted in the view that online religion is not so much

determined and shaped by technology, as earlier studies in the 1990s suggested, but rather that digital technologies are culturally and religiously appropriated. In their study of ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities in Israel, Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005) presented the notion of 'cultured technology' to gain understanding of 'how the Internet has been culturally constructed, modified, and adapted to the community's needs' (2005, p. 25). Inspired by social shaping of technology studies, Campbell (2005a) developed the idea of the 'spiritualizing of the Internet', focusing on the discursive strategies underlying the use of web technologies within religious fields. Both notions hence stress the importance of religious views on technology that inform the ways in which the Internet is put to use within various religions.

Guided by this perspective and motivated by the scarcity of comparative studies in the field, we have systematically analyzed and compared religious appropriations of the Internet from within Dutch Catholicism, Protestantism and the holistic milieu. As to the reasons for going online in the first place, the patterns that we found are remarkably similar: it is felt by each group that this is by now the only remaining viable way to reach out and make oneself heard in the radically pluralist cacophony of voices that has resulted from processes of secularization and religious change.

And yet, consistent with theories about 'cultured technology' (Barzilai-Nahon & Barzilai 2005) and 'spiritualizing of technology' (Campbell 2005a), we have found that offline religious heritages do indeed matter a lot when religions seek to culturalize, spiritualize and appropriate the Internet through web design. Our analysis of web designers' accounts shows that religious appropriations of the Internet are not processes in which coherent offline traditions are smoothly translated to a new online context. To the contrary, such appropriations are often deeply informed by struggles typical for each particular religious tradition. Rather than shaping virtual environments 'in their own image', contestations about what this 'own image' actually comprises pose major difficulties to Catholic and Protestant web designers, who find themselves faced with conflicts within their respective religious fields that yield dilemmas in religious web design. Hence, our study does not just demonstrate the differences between religious groups but also the struggles, disputes and dilemmas within each of these.

Within Dutch Catholicism, to begin with, web designers are faced with dilemmas about the desirability of either following Roman orthodoxy or creating room for dialogue and diversity when they need to decide about the functionalities, web links and contents of the Catholic websites they are working on. So, although the Internet is seen as a new means to restore a common Catholic identity, its appropriation paradoxically sparks age-old contestations over traditional hierarchical structures and the authorization of religious contents. Catholic websites are hence not simply the result of a transposition of a neat, coherent and uncontested religious tradition, but rather the outcome of religious conflict, power and contestation.

Protestant web designers face their own dilemmas. Because of Dutch Protestantism's history of fragmentation and theological dispute and disagreement, they are hardly able to build websites that transcend the particular religious identities of specific Protestant congregations. In an attempt to reach a large online audience that is ignorant of internal differences, designing websites that are acceptable to all, or even a majority, of the Protestant congregations demands the sacrifice of religious-theological content to such an extent that the resulting websites become quite neutral, merely communicating historical facts and figures and practical information. In appropriating the Internet, Protestants are hence only spared from the conflicts found in Catholicism to the extent that they are either prepared to let a thousand flowers bloom or surrender to a highly compromised image of their faith. The decentralized, network structure of the milieu of holistic spirituality, finally, makes the Internet an almost natural habitat for connecting and sharing spiritual wisdom (cf. Helland 2004). Because of the non-authoritative stance towards religious and spiritual contents, the urge to freely share spiritual ideas and experiences online, and the intuitive affinity with visual culture, neither of the problems faced by Catholics and Protestants are experienced here, which means that holistic spiritual appropriations of the Internet are less conflict-ridden processes than their Catholic and Protestant counterparts.

Our findings, in short, contribute to a further contextualization of theories about 'cultured technology' (Barzilai-Nahon & Barzilai 2005) and 'spiritualizing of the Internet' (Campbell 2005a). Evidently, the religious appropriation of the Internet is not a smooth but a conflict-ridden process in which the struggle with the shaping of technology stirs long-standing offline struggles over authority and identity that are typical of certain religious traditions. This is particularly the case with traditional religious groups: unlike 'open source religions' such as holistic spirituality and paganism (Cowan 2005, p. 30), their online presence lays bare internal tensions about religious identity that have been part of these offline traditions for ages. Religious websites of these traditions are thus not so much representations of solid, unified and coherent religious identities but rather the negotiated outcome of historical internal religious struggles.

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