

SACRED SPACE AND ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Róisín Pye

WHAT POSSIBILITIES DOES THE INTERNET offer for people to interact on religious and spiritual matters? How can the internet help Christians establish a sense of community online?

These are not questions which can be answered easily. Media studies is a comparatively new discipline, and internet research is a new branch of media studies. We are still struggling to find basic conventions for discussion. There are many different opinions, offered on the basis of wildly different forms of evidence, and with varying degrees of reflectiveness. Here I want merely to sample these opinions, and to take one website, *Sacred Space*, as a test case. I also want to highlight some of the outstanding questions that remain unanswered.

Differing Opinions

‘That the net means something for religion is undeniable. What that something is is the question.’¹ Some Christians welcome the internet as a promised land of communication and exchange, or as a new medium enhancing our knowledge of the world and of people around us; others see it as an electronic chaos where the possibility of meaningful communication is lost in an anarchic pluralism.

Among the commentators, the internet has its critics, its friends and its critical friends.² My aim is to be a critical friend, writing from a Christian perspective—one who assesses both the good and bad aspects of the internet and who is aware of the new questions which it raises.

¹ *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, edited by J. K. Hadden and D. E. Cowan (New York: JAI Elsevier Science, 2000), 8.

² For an in-depth treatment of these terms, see Heidi Campbell, ‘Approaches to Religious Research in Computer-Mediated Communication’, in *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*, edited by Jolyon Mitchell and Sophia Marriage (London: T. and T. Clark, 2003), especially 214-216.

Douglas Groothuis is an example of a critical friend when he reminds us that,

... technologies affect our sensibilities, often deadening them to truth, but technologies have not destroyed our objective reality or the possibility of knowing it.³

A recent papal document, too, seems to be encouraging critical friendship with regard to the internet:

... the new media are powerful tools for education and cultural enrichment, for commercial activity and political participation, for intercultural dialogue and understanding; and ... they also can serve the cause of religion. Yet this coin has another side. Media of communication that can be used for the good of persons and communities can be used to exploit, manipulate, dominate, and corrupt.⁴

Can we, then, make a worthwhile use of the internet and, if so, under what conditions? Can we use it to communicate meaningfully and constructively in a religious context? Can we establish authentic relationships within an online Christian community? How far can and should the Church encourage and promote online community?

Understandings of Community

But what do we mean by community? Often it seems that the critics of the internet, those who see it as a 'breeding ground for delusion',⁵ are effectively defining community in terms of relationships established in a particular physical space—the village or neighbourhood. Relationships of this kind clearly rely in large part on face-to-face communication. For Groothuis, the internet contributes to what he calls 'cocooning'. Individuals online are isolated from others, 'when they could be playing with their children, talking to neighbours over the fence, or attending musical concerts, houses of worship or block parties'.⁶

³ Douglas Groothuis, *The Soul in Cyberspace* (Michigan: Baker Books, 1997), 86.

⁴ Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Ethics in Internet*, available at www.daughtersofstpaul.com/mediastudies/churchdocs/churchininternet.html and at www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_ethics-internet_en.html (2002), section 1.

⁵ See Campbell, 'Approaches to Religious Research', 215.

⁶ Groothuis, *The Soul in Cyberspace*, 122.



In contrast, other 'critical friends' of the internet would argue that such an account of community reflects merely a nostalgia for a way of life which may (or indeed may not) have existed, say, in the rural Ireland of the 1950s. They argue that modern life is based more on social networks that span space and

time, and that the internet is one mode of communicating which facilitates this lifestyle.⁷ We do not depend on a small, tight group of neighbours and family for all our physical, emotional, economic, spiritual or other needs. We rely rather on a network of people spread over various locations, and sometimes spread over different time-zones. We affiliate ourselves with them because of shared interests or needs. These relationships develop over time, in different degrees of strength and intensity.

Thus we can find on the internet, for example, groups of people who are bound together by the need to discuss technical issues, or who want to debate the latest political achievements of Tony Blair. And we can also find those who come together to pray. 'Such groups are a technologically supported continuation of a long-term shift to communities organized by shared interests rather than by shared place or shared ancestry.'⁸ These shared interests foster a sense of community, whether its ties are weak or strong; and individuals develop bonds of friendship and trust over time.

Some researchers have affirmed that an authentic and real community can indeed exist under these conditions; Lorne Dawson, for example, says, 'a sense of community with real consequences for the behaviour of participants can be created online'.⁹ However, we must acknowledge that this is a slow process, one that is dependent on a number of supporting circumstances. The development of trust,

⁷ See Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia, 'Virtual Communities as Communities: Net Surfers Don't Surf Alone', in *Communities in Cyberspace*, edited by Marc Smith and Peter Kollock (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁸ Wellman and Gulia, 'Virtual Communities as Communities', 172.

⁹ Lorne L. Dawson, 'Researching Religion in Cyberspace: Issues and Strategies', in Hadden and Cowan, *Religion on the Internet*, 40.

which is a key element in relationships, can take time, especially in a technological environment.¹⁰

Community Online: A Case Study

One interesting case in point, no doubt well known to many readers of *The Way*, is *Sacred Space*, a website which offers people an opportunity to pray online. It uses the resources of Ignatian spirituality, offering a different passage of scripture as a basis for prayer each day. It was started by the Irish Jesuits as a temporary project for Lent 1999, and has continued ever since. It quickly attracted a response way beyond the developers' expectations. On its first day, 1,000 people logged on; currently it gets about 10,000 hits daily.¹¹ The project initially sought to help people find some kind of guidance and structure in prayer without taking too much time in their day, and within a 'space' that they were occupying frequently: their computers and the online medium of the internet. Users receive guidance and instruction on how to use the site, and they are encouraged to make it part of their daily lives. The invitation to pray proceeds like this:

It might seem strange to pray at your computer, in front of a screen, especially if there are other people around you, or distracting noises. But God is everywhere, all around us, constantly reaching out to us, even in the most unlikely situations. When we know this, and with a bit of practice, we can pray anywhere! ... Although they are written in the first person—'I'—the prayers are for doing, rather than for reading out. Each stage is a kind of exercise or meditation aimed at helping you get in touch with God and God's presence in your life.

Can we see a sense of community in all of this? The website seems, on the face of it, to be focused on the prayer-life of the individual, to be concentrating on the regular, everyday relationship between the individual and God. The website is quite static; there is no online chat room attached, or even an e-mail discussion list. But there is a feedback

¹⁰ Alf Linderman and Mia Lovheim, 'Internet, Religion and the Attribution of Social Trust', in *Mediating Religion*, 229-240.

¹¹ E-mail (1 Dec 2003). 'During the month of November, we had 262,886 visitors; on average 8,766 per day. On weekdays, we had 198,084 visitors, which averages for 20 days, 9,904 per day. On Saturdays and Sundays, 64,802 visitors; average for 10 such days, 6,408 per day.' (Hits are the records of people accessing a page/site.)

Thank you for a calm serene prayer site and the sense of being part of a worldwide community. Half an hour ago I was in despair. Your site made me able to believe again.

Hartlepool, England

facility, so that people can e-mail their responses to the site or the prayer session; and some of the feedback is published. It is here, in what the users themselves write, that we can find constant reference to community.

What are the users saying? What do they feel is happening while they are logged on to the site? One of the recurring themes is that the sheer statistics encourage users to build a sense of community. The large number of people praying online simultaneously (an average of seven per minute) gives each individual a sense of joining in a common action with others from all over the world. It is this which encourages them to imagine a network of believers praying together. One user describes her experience:

I appreciate the way you have created a sense of family through this endeavour. It not only increases the closeness I feel with my God, but also clearly connects me with others in this world. Everything seems closer, more personal.

Another user puts it very simply:

A place where people get together and pray instils a sense of community. To enrich your spiritual growth this is very important. Thank you for starting my day off with this feeling of community.

A user from Ontario, Canada, says:

It is very obvious that the Spirit is working through *Sacred Space*. I always believed that the more people pray together, the stronger the prayer. My day does not seem significantly peaceful and comforted till I share my prayers with *Sacred Space*.

This person believes that there is an 'us': people gathered for a purpose, people sharing cyberspace together in a special way that helps them bond. And he feels supported by this belief.

The feedback itself is another factor in strengthening the experience of online community. People can read other users' experiences online and get a glimpse into their lives, into the issues with which they are struggling and into the joys that they are experiencing. One user from Blackpool, England, said:

Thank you for being there. I have just been reading the feedback and found myself weeping. Such wonderful folk are also praying.

And another from Myanmar said:

I want you to know that I get inspiration reading others' notes. Gives me strength not to push the Lord out of my life.

Occasionally users will respond to a feedback that they have read and will write back out of generosity or friendship with advice and encouragement. Even in this very limited form of communication online (there are many more dynamic and interactive ways to communicate, such as discussion boards and chat rooms), people find a sense of community, of being in a relationship together, through this praying experience.

The site expands its services from time to time, linking to extra sections which give further spiritual resources or to new websites which can help in other areas of spiritual and Christian development. The *Sacred Space* team send out an electronic newsletter to all those who contribute feedback to the site, and this helps maintain and develop the sense of community. The newsletter gives information about plans

It is very obvious that the Spirit is working through 'Sacred Space'. I always believed that the more people pray together, the stronger the prayer. My day does not seem significantly peaceful and comforted till I share my prayers with Sacred Space.
Windsor, Ontario, Canada

for the future, and about who is working on the website. It provides further feedback, and also occasional contributions from users of the site, for example poetry.

Here we can see the element of generosity which often features on community sites, with people sharing information and support despite very limited contact with the other users. This finding is supported by research

evidence from other online community sites. Barry Wellman and Melena Gulia speak of a 'reciprocal supportiveness on the Net':¹²

The accumulation of small, individual acts of assistance can sustain a large community because each act is seen by the entire group and helps perpetuate an image of generalised reciprocity and mutual aid.¹³

Through their shared interest in taking time for spiritual inspiration and in developing their relationship with God, the users of *Sacred Space* are bound together in a way that transcends physical space and that brings together Irish and Indian, Australian and American, including people from different denominations.

Moreover, the community is not confined to English-speakers—a frequent limitation of the internet. *Sacred Space* is available in seventeen different languages, through translations made by volunteers who use the site, and who are enthusiastic and generous enough to take on this task for the good of others and for the development of an even wider community.

Sacred Space is thus a social meaning-system in which people share a particular world-view, in this case Christianity, online. There are clearly elements of community emerging among the users of the site, and these are acknowledged as such.¹⁴

However, *Sacred Space* has its limitations. It does not exploit all the possibilities of computer-mediated communication. It has none of the user-to-user communication that is possible through e-mail lists, newsgroups, discussion boards or chat rooms. Because it is a static site, as opposed to a dynamic one, there are many aspects of community that it lacks. There is no facility for the users to engage in dialogue together, building up the interpersonal relationships that are normally

*Gives me strength not
to push the Lord out of
my life.*

Yangon, Myanmar

*I appreciate the way
you have created a
sense of family
through this
endeavour.*

Address not given

¹² Wellman and Gulia, 'Virtual Communities as Communities', 177.

¹³ Wellman and Gulia, 'Virtual Communities as Communities', 178.

¹⁴ See Linderman and Lovheim, 'Internet, Religion and the Attribution of Social Trust', 233.

essential to community. Self-disclosure and communication is not possible here, except when stories are shared in the feedback. The users have only limited opportunities for exploring together what their shared experience actually means for each of them, or for finding further areas of common interest and belief. What Wellman and Gulia identify as one of the key uses of the internet, that of 'maintaining intermediate-strength ties between people who cannot see each other frequently', is not a factor in *Sacred Space*.¹⁵

Questions for the Future

It is undeniable, then, that religious websites are generating new and powerful forms of community online. Strong ties between people, a shared vision or meaning, a willingness to be honest and generous with time—these are some of the common traits in communities formed around religious websites or discussion groups. *Sacred Space* illustrates all these, if in a limited way.

***Religious web
sites are
generating new
and powerful
forms of
community***

But there are many questions still unanswered about how community interaction online might develop. How, for example, might *Sacred Space* grow further? What would happen if the team introduced a means of interpersonal communication between the users? How would that transform people's experience of the site? The research mentioned above suggests that this change would enrich that experience for many people, giving them an extra depth of community and relationship in their lives. And indeed, there are questions about how far religious sites of this kind in general can be developed. Will the use of video technology in online communication bring us closer together in years to come?

There is a particularly interesting issue about the relationship between online community and the sense of community generated by conventional offline worship. Campbell talks about the experience of gathering together for worship in a standard church. Despite the efforts made to gather people into a worshipping community, 'individual members and visitors often enter alone, sit alone, leave

¹⁵ Wellman and Gulia, 'Virtual Communities as Communities', 185.

alone'.¹⁶ People can experience a sense of isolation in a church, despite being surrounded by a believing community; by contrast, there seems to be a sense of togetherness and sharing in online communities, although each user sits on their own in front of the screen.

What are the Churches to make of this? Can church leaders learn from this form of communication something about how to enhance offline worship? Can they be 'critical friends', and explore further the possibilities that the internet offers to believers? The key question is whether the traits we have seen in online communities amount to a version of community strong enough to fit with how the Church understands itself communally. But far more research needs to be done before we can answer this question satisfactorily.

Present research suggests that online communities enhance offline engagement. As Douglas Groothuis concedes:

... despite the many hazards to community that cyberspace presents, the medium can help create and solidify community when it is used carefully and tethered to the real world in tangible ways.¹⁷

But we need to acknowledge the 'chocolate chip cookie factor'—the need for physical connection.¹⁸ And Groothuis also cautions about the 'eerie and precarious combination of presence and absence, of involvement and disengagement' that the internet involves.¹⁹ We must be careful about how much priority we give to relationships online, to be ready to accept the limitations of technology, and to prevent the internet from being mistaken for the 'highest possible form of human attainment'.²⁰



¹⁶ Heidi Campbell, "Gimme that Online Religion": Spiritual Pilgrimage Online and Implications for the Culture of Religion', unpublished paper for New Media Arts in Advanced Technology Culture, International Conference, University of Luton (1999).

¹⁷ Groothuis, *The Soul of Cyberspace*, 141.

¹⁸ It is impossible to give someone a plate of chocolate chip cookies online. See Heidi Campbell, 'Plug In, Log On, and Drop Out? The Impact of the Internet on the Religious Community', available at <http://homepages.ed.ac.uk/ewcv24/BASR.html>.

¹⁹ Groothuis, *The Soul of Cyberspace*, 123.

²⁰ Groothuis, *The Soul of Cyberspace*, 156.

There is surely important work for the Church to do here. If Christians can reflect carefully and realistically on what is happening on the internet, and can study it thoroughly from within a strong sense of Church teaching, they may be able to make a valuable contribution, at once supportive and critical, to the new forms of human community that are undoubtedly emerging from the internet—especially those which are explicitly religious in character.

Róisín Pye helped to run the *Sacred Space* website at the Jesuit Communication Centre in Dublin from 1999 to 2002. She recently completed a Masters in Theology and Media at the University of Edinburgh, and is currently working as a freelance web editor for CAFOD in London.