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*Master thesis:*

**Internet based religions:  
alternative and deregulated systems of beliefs  
in new media environment**

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## **Abstract**

The main topic of this thesis is exploring the phenomenon of internet based religions, with a focus on religions that are based on the Internet as a divinity, as a societies society's response to the development of technology and the creation of new media. New media landscape together with philosophy of interconnected society has affected our everyday life rituals, one of the key ones being religion.

The aim of this thesis is to identify and describe phenomena of internet based religions, with a focus on religions that are based on the Internet as a divinity, the surroundings and influences that have led to its establishment, as well as present rituals, symbols and dogma behind this newly formed religion and compare it to the traditional religious practices.

Thus, the research involved a thorough desk research of the theoretical background, comparative case study analysis and a field research in form of semi-structured interviews with experts from the field of sociology, internet and religion. The discussion that followed offered an insight into the most important issues and dilemmas related to the new media surrounding, technology and the society, and internet based religions.

The conclusion of this work implies that internet based religions encourage the development of new community models, in this way contributing to a more pluralistic and diverse society, through redefinition of traditional dogma's and rituals adjusting to new types of communication and behavior of the modern society.

## Résumé

Le sujet principal de cette thèse est l'exploration du phénomène des religions basées dans l'Internet, avec l'accent sur les religions basées dans l'Internet considéré comme divinité, en tant qu'expression de la réponse d'une société au développement de la technologie et à l'avènement des nouveaux médias. Le nouveau paysage médiatique combiné avec la nouvelle philosophie d'interconnection de la société a affecté nos rituels quotidiens, dont l'un d'eux clef, la religion. Par exemple, des groupes religieux conventionnels utilisent l'Internet de façon nouvelles créant ainsi des cyber-religions en transférant la communication et l'échange d'informations à des rituels et services en ligne réguliers. Les nouveaux médias ont créé un habitat qui a agi comme un stimulant et une précondition pour la fondation d'une variété de nouveaux mouvements.

Avant l'enrichissement de la cohésion sociale et l'intégration de la société par les nouveaux médias, un mouvement dans les années 1960 s'était formé autour d'un livre de science fiction par Robert Heinlein intitulé "L'église de tous les mondes". Ce mouvement ou phénomène était plus tard décrit par Dr. Possamai comme une hyper-réelle religion, et il était suivi par une série d'autres initiatives tel que le Jediism inspiré par les films "Star Wars" ou le Matrixism inspiré par la Trilogie Matrix. Réinventer les anciennes religions et mélanger les vieilles religions avec la culture populaire est devenu une pratique commune pour les consommateurs/croyants. A travers cette pratique, ils ont établi de nouvelles formes de religions fragmentaires et synchrétiques comme de nouvelles formes de communication dans le cadre de rituels et dogmes traditionnels. Quand ceci est devenu une mode, la question qui a été posée était: ces mouvements sont-ils sacrilèges ou contribuent-ils au développement du pluralisme et de la diversité religieuse, répondant aux besoins nouvellement formés de la société des nouveaux médias.

Trois nouveaux mouvements religieux fondés dans l'Internet comme force divine sont:

- l'Eglise de la réalité, fondée en 2005 par Marc Perkel, qui englobe les dernières technologies de la religion fondée dans l'Internet et repose principalement sur l'engagement de la poursuite de la réalité telle qu'elle est, représentant un nouveau

regard sur le monde.

- En 2006 Matt MacPherson fonda une religion basée dans l'Internet dont les croyants sont membres de l'Eglise de Google et croient que le moteur de recherche Google est le plus proche que l'humanité ait jamais atteint dans l'expérience directe d'un Dieu *réel*, and qu'il existe plus d'évidence de la divinité de Google qu'il n'y a pour la divinité d'autres dieux plus traditionnels..

- Le dernier "progrès" vers l'acceptation, même légale, de religions basées dans l'Internet a eu lieu en 2012 quand la Suède a formellement reconnu l'Eglise missionnaire du kopiism qui représente une congrégation de partageurs de dossiers qui argument que copier des informations est une vertue sacrée.

Les religions basées dans l'Internet sont établies sur des concepts de libéralisme, pluralisme et activisme, une conséquence directe des possibilités des nouveaux médias, et d'un public participatoire et actif, ce qui sera discuté plus longuement dans cette thèse.

Cette thèse ne tirera aucune conclusion morale concernant ce phénomène.

### **But de la recherche**

Le but de cette thèse est d'identifier et de décrire le phénomène de religions basées dans l'Internet, l'environnement et les influences qui ont amené à leur établissement, ainsi que de présenter les rituels, symbols et dogmes de cette nouvelle forme de religion.

### **Questions de recherche**

#### **Questions principales:**

Question 1: Comment le développement de la technologie et des nouveaux médias ont-ils influencé le développement de nouveaux besoins socio-culturels?

Question 2: Les religions basées dans l'Internet integrent-elles des rituels et dogmes traditionnels, les redéfinissant et les adaptant à l'environnement des nouveaux médias et à un public actif?

Question 3: L'existence de religion basée dans l'Internet répond-elle au besoin de

socialisation et celui d'appartenance à la communauté du consommateur?

Question 4: S'il existe, quel est l'engagement social, culturel et politique des religions basées dans l'Internet?

### **Questions secondaires:**

Question 5: Les religions basées dans l'Internet sont-elles des religions en soi?

Question 6: L'Internet est-il plutôt un stimulateur ou facilitateur pour la création de nouvelles religions?

Question 7: Les nouveaux médias endommagent-ils ou font-ils évoluer la religion?

Question 8: Les nouveaux médias contribuent-ils à la sécularisation ou ré-sacrilisation?

Question 9: Quelles sont les aspirations des croyants des religions basées dans l'Internet, et existe-t-il une distinction entre ces aspirations et celles des religions traditionnelles?

### **Hypothèses**

- Le nouveau paysage médiatique conjointement avec la philosophie d'une société interconnectée agit comme un stimulus et une précondition pour l'établissement de nouveaux modèles de communautés religieuses.
- L'émergence de nouveaux médias a développé de nouveaux besoins socio-culturels chez les consommateurs consistant à prendre un rôle plus actif dans les rituels quotidiens, ainsi transformant les consommateurs en créateurs.
- Les religions basées dans l'Internet encouragent le développement de nouveaux modèles communautaires contribuant ainsi à une société plus pluraliste et diverse.
- Une redéfinition des dogmes et rituels traditionnels s'effectue à travers l'adaptation à de nouvelles formes de communication et comportement par les utilisateurs des nouveaux médias.

La méthodologie utilisée pour l'élaboration de la thèse commence avec une recherche

initiale qui vise à définir la portée du problème à travers une comprehensive recherche de théories reliées, de pratiques et termes clefs tels que: communication entremise par ordinateur, société connectée en réseaux, sociologie de l'Internet, activism cyber, web 2.0, contenu produit par l'utilisateur, intelligence collective, médiatisation.

La recherche ensuite vise à identifier des théories significatives et à définir les creux du cadre des communautés en ligne; de l'Internet en tant qu'espace sacré; de même que de la notion de croyance et du système de croyance. L'idée de la religion et de nouveaux mouvements religieux sont aussi traités, suivi par l'identification des premières applications de l'usage religieux de l'Internet à travers des activités religieuses et l'engagement de croyants en ligne.

Selon Kenneth Shouler, la religion est une collection de systèmes culturels, systèmes de croyance, et visions du monde qui associent l'humanité à la spiritualité et parfois aux valeurs morales. Même si certains théoriciens soutiennent l'assentiment de certaines religions basées dans l'Internet comme de véritables mouvements religieux, il est indéniable qu'elles n'ont pas toutes les caractéristiques des religions traditionnelles telles que: rituels; sermons; commémorations; festivals; fêtes; initiations; prières; musique; service public etc. L'authenticité de certains mouvements religieux tels que le Kopiism se distingue d'une religion farce ou parodie. Cependant, il revient aux croyants de décider de l'authenticité réelle de ces religions et aux critiques de l'accepter ou de continuer à l'examiner et à la renier. La citation de Carole Cusack explique cette notion: "si elles ne sont pas sérieuses, alors elles ne sont pas sérieuses. Mais si elles sont sérieuses, alors elles sont vraiment religieuses."

La cartographie systématique des religions en ligne a été effectuée afin d'expliquer l'environnement dans lequel les religions basées dans l'Internet fonctionnent. Une analyse comparative de trois cas est présentée: le Kopiisme, l'Eglise de Google, et l'Eglise de la réalité afin d'identifier de nouveaux modèles de pratiques religieuses, de rituels et symbols.

L'analyse comparative des trois études de cas –l'Eglise du Kopiism, l'Eglise de Google et l'Eglise de la réalité- démontre la signification de l'engagement social, culturel et politique incrusté dans leur fonctionnement. Aussi la croyance politique du fondateur est cruciale pour la religion même. L'importance de ces engagements peut se reconnaître dans le dilemme de plus en plus prononcé concernant le partage des



informations et dans le concept des droits d'auteur.

L'étape méthodologique suivante consiste à répondre aux questions de la recherche à travers une discussion virtuelle issue des révélations et opinions quant aux réponses obtenues des experts dans le domaine des nouveaux médias, de la religion et de la communication lors d'entretiens structurés conduits par l'auteur.

Les experts qui ont été interviewés sont: Heidi Campbell – professeur intéressé depuis 1997 à la recherche des religions et de l'Internet et l'impact des nouveaux médias sur les communautés religieuses; Marcus Davidsen –candidat au doctorat, chercheur en religions imaginaires; Jolyon Mitchell – professeur des communications, arts et religion; Carole Cusack – professeur de religion intéressé dans la recherche des tendances religieuses contemporaines; Chris Helland –professeur intéressé dans la recherche des activités religieuses en ligne, de la religion et de l'Internet; Lynn Clark – professeur des communications présentement engagé dans un projet intitulé “Culture populaire dans un monde culturellement pluraliste”, intéressé dans la recherche des médias et de la religion; Paul Emerson Teusner –professeur dont la recherche est axée sur la manière dont les jeunes utilisent les appareils numériques et le logiciel social pour construire des identités sociales, relatives au genre, religieuses et culturelles.

A cause de la dynamique des changements dans cet environnement multi-disciplinaire, il a été nécessaire de sortir du strict cadre des religions basées dans l'Internet pour adresser les questions plus vastes de la sociologie de l'Internet, d'une société de réseaux modernisée, ainsi que des religions traditionnelles et les nouveaux mouvements religieux qui opèrent en-ligne. Cette orientation plus étendue fournit les réponses quant à la source des besoins de la création de religions basées dans l'Internet, sous quelles influences et dans quel context elles croissent, et comment la société les perçoit.

Dans presque toutes les religions qui utilisent l'Internet, que ce soit des religions en ligne (qui importent les formes religieuses traditionnelles en ligne) ou des religions basées dans l'Internet (adaptation de la religion pour créer de nouvelles formes d'interactions spirituelles), l'on peut clairement observer la tentative de recréer ou stimuler l'espace réel en espace virtuel, certaines de ces eglises étant plus conscientes que d'autres du plein potentiel de l'espace virtuel.

Les religions en ligne considèrent comme évident que l'on peut utiliser l'Internet pour bien plus que l'obtention d'informations concernant une religion. En fait, si l'Internet est conceptualisé comme une cyber-réalité, il peut fournir à une communauté presque tous les aspects habituels ou traditionnels des activités religieuses et plus que cela.

Les activités religieuses en ligne principalement incluent:

- Assembler des informations religieuses en ligne;
- Pratiquer en ligne sa religion et rituels;
- Recrutement et activités missionnaires;
- Communauté religieuse en ligne –représentant un groupe en ligne qui interagit avec des croyants géographiquement séparés, et qui partagent un rapprochement ou une conviction spirituel;
- Octroyer des soins pastoraux à travers des messageries instantanées telles que msn, skype, et autres programmes “chat”.

Quant aux hypothèses de la recherche, toutes ont été confirmées, certaines plus que d'autres.

La nouveau paysage médiatique combiné avec la philosophie d'une société interconnectée agit comme un stimulant et une pré-condition pour la fondation de nouveaux modèles de communautés religieuses. De plus, même si l'émergence des nouveaux médias n'a pas complètement développé de nouveaux besoins socio-culturels, mais n'a qu'éveiller leurs manifestations, ils encouragent les consommateurs à prendre un rôle plus actif dans les rituels quotidiens, transformant les consommateurs en créateurs.

Ainsi, les religions basées dans l'Internet encouragent le développement de nouveaux modèles communautaires, contribuant ainsi à une société plus pluralistique et diverse à travers la redéfinition de dogmes et rituels traditionnels, ajustant ces derniers à de nouveaux types de communication et au comportement de la société moderne.

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Finally I would like to thank the **Internet** for providing me with all of the material, guidance, and spiritual strength, (with constant distractions). I couldn't have done this without her/him/it.

*Green plants are tender and filled with sap. At their death they are withered and dry.  
Therefore the stiff and unbending is the way of death.*

*The gentle and yielding is the way of life.*

Taoist proverb

## **Introduction**

The main topic of this thesis is exploring the phenomenon of internet based religions, with a focus on religions that are based on the Internet as a divinity, as a societies society's response to the development of technology and the creation of new media. New media landscape together with philosophy of interconnected society has affected our everyday life rituals, one of the key ones being religion. As an example, conventional religions groups made new uses of the Internet, thus creating cyber-religions by transferring communication and information exchange to regular online rituals and services. New media created a habitat that acted as a stimulus and precondition for the foundation of various new movements.

Prior to the new media that enriched the social cohesion and integration of society, a movement in the 1960s was formed around a science-fiction book by Robert Heinlein called "The Church of All Worlds". This movement or phenomena was later described by Dr Possamai as a hyper-real religion, and was followed by series of other initiatives such as Jediism inspired by the "Star Wars" movies or Matrixism by the Matrix Trilogy. Re-inventing ancient religions and mixing old religions with popular culture has become a widespread practice for new media consumers/believers. Through this practice, they establish new forms of fragmentary and syncretic religions as new forms of communications in the framework of traditional rituals and dogmas. This trend raised the question: are these initiatives sacrileges or do they contribute to the development of pluralism and religious diversity, answering to the newly formed needs of the new media society.

Three new religious movements that were founded on the basis of Internet as a divine force are:

The Church of Reality, founded in 2005 by Marc Perkell, that embraces the latest technology in the religion founded on the Internet, and it is based primarily on the commitment to the pursuit of reality the way it really is, representing a new world view.

In 2006 Matt MacPherson founded an internet based religion called *The Church of Google* that believes the search engine Google is the closest humankind has ever come to directly experiencing an *actual* God, and that there is more evidence in favor of Google's divinity than there is for the divinity of other more traditional gods.

The latest “progress” towards even legal acceptance of internet based religions was in 2012, when Sweden has officially recognized The Missionary Church of Kopimism that represents a congregation of file sharers who claim that copying information is a sacred virtue.

Internet based religions are established on concepts of liberalism, pluralism and activism, which is the direct consequence of new media opportunities and participative, active audience and it will be further discussed in this thesis.

This paper will not draw any moral conclusions concerning this phenomenon.

### **Aim of the research**

The aim of this thesis is to identify and describe phenomena of internet based religions, with a focus on religions that are based on the Internet as a divinity, the surroundings and influences that have led to its establishment, as well as present rituals, symbols and dogma behind this newly formed religion and compare it to the traditional religious practices.

### **Research questions**

#### **Primary:**

Question 1: How did the development of technology and new media responded to the rise of the new socio-cultural needs?

Question 2: Do internet based religions integrate traditional rituals and dogma

redefining and adjusting them to the new media surrounding and active audience?

Question 3: What is, if any, the social, cultural and political engagement behind (in focus of) the internet based religions?

### **Secondary:**

Question 4: Are internet based religions, religions (per se)? – If we consider religions as *a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs*<sup>1</sup>.

Question 5: Is Internet more of a stimulator or facilitator in the process of creating new religions?

Question 6: Is new media devolving or evolving religion? If we accept the notion that religion today is definitely changed and is changing continuously, is that change positive or negative. Is it progressing to a more advanced form of religion or is it negatively changing the pre-established rules and institutions.

Question 7: Is new media contributing to secularization or re-sacralization? If we consider re-sacralization as the return of religious meanings to public sectors of social life such as politics, the arts, and the body, and the resistance of secularization( as the removal of religious meanings from public life)<sup>2</sup>.

Question 8: What are the expectations of believers (followers) of internet based religions, and is there a distinction between these expectations and those from other traditional religions?

### **Hypotheses**

- The new media landscape together with philosophy of interconnected society is acting as a stimulus and precondition for the foundation of new models of religious communities.
- The emergence of the new media has developed new socio-cultural needs of the

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1 Definition taken from the Online etymology, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/religion>, (dictionary accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> of September 2012)

2 Hadden, Jeffrey K. *SOC 257: New Religious Movements Lectures*, University of Virginia, Department of Sociology.

consumers and inspired them to take a more active role in all everyday rituals, making consumers becoming creators.

- Internet based religions encourage the development of new community models, thus contributing to a more pluralistic and diverse society.
- **Redefinition of** traditional dogmas and rituals are redefined through adjustment to new types of communication and behavior of the new media users.

### **Relevance of the research**

The importance of this research lies not only in the identification of new social and cultural models of communication and interaction set in the context of ever-changing nature of the humankind, but also in examining the motifs and influences for their forming in the period that resembles the period Karl Jaspers termed the “axial age”, a period between 800BC and 200BC that was shaped by innovations in the government, transport and communications, thus witnessing monotheism’s move into the mainstream with Zoroastrianism, the appearance of Buddhism, the establishment of Confucianism and Greek humanistic philosophy.

Newly formed religions, all internet based, have gathered and unified followers from all over the world around the same postulates of faith, promoting certain rituals needed to be practiced in order to become a true follower of a certain specific dogma, more concretely - information sharing.

The question of science versus religion in the moment of information revolutionized society is considered differently according to various discussions. However, these movements combine science and religion in a form of symbioses, thus, offering the users to use science and creation as a form of prayer and practicing religion, and doing so becoming active users.

“Almost 2,000 years and no new God!” Nietzsche's observation made over a century ago, relates to the unhappy believers first looking back to their roots for comfort, and if the comfort is not found, they will inevitably search for a new god. This research will try to answer the question of legal recognition of new God as a form of answering to the unhappy believers newly formed needs, in the context of religion as a social tool to inculcate certain habits in individuals which help to sustain and nurture a society.

## **Theoretical background**

Internet based religion represents a rather new phenomena due to its inter-connectivity with the internet, new forms of communication, and the birth of new media. None the less, theories in social and communication sciences reflect onto this phenomena., thus, the research and theories of Manuel Castells (a sociologist especially associated with information society and communication research) will be addressed. In this thesis his views on network society and media filtering human communication will be addressed.

Due to the dynamic of changes in this multidisciplinary environment it was necessary to exit the framework of only internet based religions and address the broader issues of the sociology of the internet, active audience, modernized network society, traditional religions, and new religious movements operating online. This wider focus gives answers to where the need for the creation of internet based religions started, under what influences and in what context it is growing, and how society can perceive it.

The methodology of the thesis starts with an initial research aimed at defining the scope of the problem by conducting a comprehensive research of related theories, practices, and key terms such as: computer mediated communication; network society - the term was introduced by Jan van Dijk in his book *The Network Society*, published in 1991, and used later by Manuel Castells in his book *The Network Society* published in 1996, as a part of his trilogy *The Information Age*; sociology of the internet; cyber activism; web 2.0; user generated content; collective intelligence; and mediatization – a term introduced by Stig Hjarvard together with mediation of the media.

Thereafter, the research focuses on identifying significant theories for, and defining gaps of: the framework of online communities; internet as a sacred space – researched mostly by Heidi Campbell that has also been researching religion and the internet and what impact new media technologies are having on religious communities; as well as the notion of belief, and system of belief. The idea of religion and new religious movements is also addressed, followed by the recognition of the first uses of religious use of the internet through religious activities online and engaging of believers online.

The major distinction between the religions that use the internet was first done by Chris Helland, an expert in online religious activity and religion and Internet research.



He studies religion in contemporary culture from a sociological perspective. His primary work examines the impact of the Internet and World Wide Web on a variety of religious traditions.

## Methodology

Design of the research is constructed through following steps:

Phase:	Activity:
Initial research	defining the scope of the problem through conducting a comprehensive research of related theories and practices.
Review of prior research	reflecting on the secondary resources, identifying significant theories, defining gaps and justification for present study.
Case studies	comparative analysis of three internet based churches selected according to their dogma and rituals that “preach” of Internet as a deity, in order to identify new models of religious practices, rituals and symbols. This thesis will focus on three internet based religions, that believe that Internet itself is of divine nature, The Church of Google, the Church of Reality and The Missionary Church of Kopimism. Other internet based religions such as Matrixism, Jediism, The church of Flying spaghetti monster and similar will not be addressed since the nature of the divine in them are based on other symbolism and rituals, even though they all are web browser based churches.
Structured interviews	With experts from the field of new media, religion and communication.
Data collection	from secondary resources, content analysis, legal framework analysis, structured interviews, questionnaire, desk research.
Data analysis	statistical and qualitative analysis of the gathered data through interviews, and the questionnaire, as well as other primary resources, with the goal of recognizing the influences and patterns in the practices.
Conclusions	

# Theoretical framework

## Computer-mediated Communication

Computer-mediated communication is a process that allows people to create and exchange information using networked telecommunications systems or non-networked computers that assist encoding, transmitting and decoding messages. It is also defined as any type of communication that happens through the use of two or more networked computers. Today most of the CMC is happening thanks to internet via instant messages, e-mails, chat rooms etc. Scholarship of this process refers to various perspectives including social, cognitive, linguistic, cultural, technical of course, information wise, political etc. Generally speaking the most important characteristic of the CMC according to John December<sup>3</sup> are the process and the context.

Since, this represents communication mostly between people, today, much of the online communication happens as a consequence of social networking via social software. This social aspect of human interaction is very interesting for investigating the difference between online and offline behavior, especially since CMC is becoming ever more present due to the fact that many of interpersonal everyday interactions occurs this way, e.g. business, education, social. CMC even started affecting our languages, through the creation of paralinguistic symbols and words that are universal, global, such as emoticons, and acronyms serving as internet slang e.g. LOL, ROFL, OMG, BRB<sup>4</sup>.

This type of communication allows users to communicate one with another, many to one, or one to many through various tools, such as blogs, RSS feeds, bulletin boards, online games, social networks such as FB, twitter, or video-sharing websites such as Youtube, or audio-sharing such as soundcloud etc.

Characteristics of this type of communication can be dynamics, impression formation, deception etc. This is explained through different manners of communication, for example if you are using instant messaging your conversation is synchronous, at the same time, and usually lost after closing the chat window (unless prior to closing you

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3 John December, <http://www.december.com/john/study/cmc/what.html>, (accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> August, 2012)

4 LOL i.e. laughing out loud, ROFL i.e. rolling on the floor laughing; OMG i.e. oh my god; BRB i.e. be right back;

copy paste the conversation to a document, or save chat logs), whilst e-mail and message boards are low in synchronicity but all the messages are saved and stored. The advantages of communicating in this manner can both be regarded as disadvantages, since they include total liberty of social conduct, anonymity and in part privacy depending on the program used or webpage visited, and probably the most important advantage is that CMC can overcome psychological and social limitations of other form of communication, e.g. communicating while not sharing the same place.

Computer-mediated communication has benefits in many aspects of our lives, such as language learning, peer to peer knowledge exchange, professional to others, artists to fans, users, a friend to a friend, a professional service to its clients. Even though most of this communication helps the humanity interact and build relationships, gain in many ways, there are some behaviors which are negative such as spreading false information, criminal behavior, and for example cyber-bullying or cyber-stalking.

Cyber-bullying represents a behavior that is conducted with an intention to harm other people, whilst cyber-stalking may refer to identity thefts, monitoring, threats, harassment etc. This type of behavior is sanctioned and prohibited by various organizations, state institutions and other international actors.

Since, basically all forms, types and characteristics of interpersonal communication are present in the process of computer mediated communication, and due to the fact that most of it is happening online, using the internet, CMC facilitated the creation of the Network society, a global phenomena anticipated by Marshal McLuhan.

Today, there are around 6,930,055,154 people in the world out of whom around 2,267,233,742 are internet users<sup>5</sup>. For example in America there are 3 hundred million internet users. This high level of penetration the technology has in the modern society was recognized as an advantage that had to be used by various subjects. One of these subjects are religious institutions. Grey matter research has published the results of their internet usage for religious purposes in 2012, stating that almost half of online Americans use the Internet for religious purposes<sup>6</sup>. Internet use for religious purposes is particularly common among the young. Fifty-seven percent of online adults under age 35 use the Internet for religion. People who are religiously active are particularly

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5 Internet usage statistics , <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm> (accessed on 4th September, 2012)

6 Grey Matter Research, [http://greymatterresearch.com/index\\_files/Online\\_Religion.htm](http://greymatterresearch.com/index_files/Online_Religion.htm) , (accessed on 4th September, 2012)

liable to use the Internet for religious purposes. For instance, 69% of those who attend worship services once a month or more use the Internet for spiritual purposes, compared to 27% of those who do not attend worship regularly. Similarly, religious use of the Internet is 70% among people who read the Bible or another sacred text at least once a month, versus 28% among those who do not.

More from the research:

- 91% of evangelicals use the internet for religious purposes
- 19% have, in the past six months, visited the website of a church or other place of worship they are currently attending
- During that same time frame, another 17% have visited the website of a church or place of worship they were not attending
- 19% have visited a website designed to provide religious instruction or learning during the last six months
- 17% read religion-oriented blogs once a month or more
- 14% have a pastor or other religious leader as a friend on Facebook or a similar social network site
- 11% have visited the website of a group or organization from a religious faith that is different from their own during the last six months
- One out of ten have "Liked" a church or other place of worship on Facebook or a similar social network site
- 8% participate in religion-oriented discussions online (e.g. bulletin boards or forums) once a month or more
- 2% follow a church or other place of worship on Twitter
- Another 2% follow a pastor or other religious leader on Twitter

These results show the high level of importance of CMC for believers today, especially the young. The interconnectivity of CMC and religion can be explained through the analogy of the invention of the Gutenberg's printing press that produced the famous 42 line Bible. What being able to print the bible meant for the society in the XV century is what the medium of internet now means to the modern society.

## **The Network Society**

Modernization of the world manifested through the spread of networked, digital information and communication technology. As previously mentioned computer mediated communication has caused the way people communicate but also operate in today's world. This phenomenon has caused significant changes to the political, social, economical and cultural sphere.

The term was introduced by Jan van Dijk in his book *The Network Society*, published in 1991, and used later by Manuel Castells in his book *The Network Society* published in 1996, as a part of his trilogy *The Information Age*. Van Dijk describes the network society as a society in which social and media networks shape the core structures at all levels, individual, organizational and social. Castells definition is quite similar. He states that network societies as a version of social networks are very old in nature and historically representing a society where the key social structures and activities are organized around information networks, which is why in network societies these information networks are processed electronically. Castells unlike Van Dijk defines these works as basic units of the modern society.

Nevertheless, technology and its development according to Castells is not the only element that defines the network society, other elements include culture, economy and politics, or more concretely, religion, cultural upbringing, political organizations and social status.

New media is that technological development that helped create the network society. The concept behind this new method of communicating in the digital world allowed smaller groups of people to congregate online and share, sell, and exchange goods and information. Also, the ability to share opinions allowed more people to have their voice heard both locally and globally. The crucial element of the new media that affects modern society is interactivity.

The interactivity in network societies and new media represent the possibility of reaction on a certain action. No longer is the communication with the media or the transmitted message only receiving and decoding it, now it is answering on it and even creating your own message and sending it either back or to others, individual or group or a community. The ability to act both locally and globally has created a new term,

almost a slang for new media, and it is acting *glocally*. Since not only powerful organization, or the government are the creators of the message, a new concept of horizontal networks of communication is born which in practice resulted in the explosion of blogs, vlogs, podcasts, streamings, etc. that allow people to communicate with each other.

Before, it was believed by many critics of the new media and the network society including Van Dijk that this would directly affect the offline communication of the society in a way of reducing it. Moreover, it was believed that the possibility of communicating with the whole world would make us more isolated and antisocial. This is not the case. Instead of lowering or reducing face to face communication the birth and development of internet as the new medium has encouraged face to face communication and connected society in a proactive way, enabling the users to take action easily and more effectively. From different studies done across the world it was shown that active internet users that have developed profiles on social networks, many virtual friends, or create their own content for example, are more socially engaged in face to face communication and have more friends in “real” life than the politically active non active internet users. This trend is most visible with younger population, or the youth. Internet literacy, and inclination towards the necessary use of technology in everyday life and of course the ability to overcome and learn faster the usage of new technologies is more common with younger population. *Digital natives* is a term introduced to explain the process of new generations accepting the changes in technology faster and almost intuitively. Whilst older generations that need to adopt new technology and put more effort in embracing the changes are called the *digital immigrants*<sup>7</sup>.

Active internet literate user can use the world wide web as a way of communicating through one to many spreading his content. Nevertheless, this is not the solely benefit of internet, the birth of a possibility of sending the message in a many to many way represents the crucial change internet as new media has brought. Any individual with an appropriate technology and knowledge, creativity, or a need for creation or sharing can produce his or her online media and include images, text, and sound about whatever he or she chooses.

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<sup>7</sup> Marc Prensky first used the term *digital native* in his work *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants* published in 2001.

Observed historically, thanks to the unfortunate World War I and II the technology has in a short period of time progressively developed. The patents and new scientific findings that were primarily invented and researched for the sole purpose of war and supremacy were later used in different scientific disciplines. Similar trend is happening today. Through the development of interactive gaming industry, that is ever more growing, actually new media develops. Online video games such as World of Warcraft, the Sims Online, and Second Life for example have changed the meaning and process behind new media. Innovations made to the new media that came from online video games, allowed users to establish relationships and connections with an experience of community belonging transcending traditional temporal and spatial boundaries creating virtual communities, and worlds.

Gaming industry shows that all aspects, tools, and elements of new media continuously change and are constantly redefined and modified by the interaction between users, emerging technologies, cultural changes etc.

New notions and phenomena are born every day thanks to new media, more specifically the internet. Some of the new trends in the virtual world relevant to the new needs of the modern societies are:

- Web 2.0 – a concept of a network as a platform used by the society for information sharing, interoperability, user-centered design and collaboration over the internet. Examples of this platforms are social networking sites<sup>8</sup>, blogs<sup>9</sup>, wikipedia<sup>10</sup>, video sharing sites<sup>11</sup>, hosted services<sup>12</sup>, web applications<sup>13</sup>, mashups<sup>14</sup> and folksonomies<sup>15</sup>. The concept of the Web 2.0 was introduced by Tim O'Reilly on the media conference held in 2004 where he explained that Web 2.0 does not represent a new technological invention after the internet was born but a result of cumulative changes in the ways software developers and end-users use the web. He perceives the Web as a place where everybody shares various content.

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8 E.g. Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/>)

9 E.g. Blogger – a blog publishing service (<http://www.blogger.com>)

10 E.g. Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org>)

11 E.g. Youtube (<http://www.youtube.com/>)

12 E.g. iPage hosting service (<http://www.ipage.com/ipage/index.html>)

13 E.g. Google calendar ( [www.google.com/calendar](http://www.google.com/calendar))

14 .Mashup is a web application hybrid. E.g. Google maps ([maps.google.com/](http://maps.google.com/))

15 Folksonomy is a system of social tagging introduced by Thomas Vander Wal e.g. flickr™ ([www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com))

- User-generated content – is content created by end users, and software developers, basically anyone that uses the internet. The content itself is various in nature covering everything from web applications, solutions for processing problems, news, gossip, research, art etc.
- Collective intelligence<sup>16</sup> – derives from sociobiology referring to consensus decision making seen in the behavior of bacteria, animals, and now computer networks. With computer networks collective intelligence applies to the context of mass peer review, and crowdsourcing applications. It presents a synergy of a sort, between data, information, knowledge, tools for processing them such as software and hardware and experts or general public that tries to create and maintain up to date knowledge and process the information received.

## **Sociology of internet**

The invention of internet changed the existing society - sublimed it into an information society. The process of communication, mechanization, and life in general have been changed. The use of internet was progressively expanding so was the space of the network itself, and the number of users. In the last five years the number of internet users has doubled, now representing more than 30% of the entire world population.<sup>17</sup>

Even though internet was initially created for the communication between users and distant computers or data bases, the users started using it primarily for communication between themselves. Sending e-mail, and internet relay chat between the users helped create numerous communities, later forums, that could relate to what agora's were in the ancient times.

E-mail actually predates internet, starting in the 1965 as a way for multiple users of a time sharing mainframe computer to communicate. Therefore e-mail actually represented a crucial tool in creating the internet. The growth of internet during the 1980s and early 1990s, was focused on ability to find and organize files and information. So, the millennium invention of internet being widespread as we know it

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<sup>16</sup> Noubel, Jean-François; (2004, rev. 2007), "Collective Intelligence: the Invisible Revolution", <http://publishing.yudu.com/Library/Arswi/CollectiveIntelligen/resources/index.htm?skipFlashCheck=true>, (accessed on 1<sup>st</sup> September, 2012)

<sup>17</sup> Internet usage statistics , <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm> (accessed on 4th September, 2012)



today begun with the world wide web, and the development of search engines. The battle field for the best search engine was for the best relevancy algorithm, and Google's PageRank in the 1998 received the most press coverage.

The possibility to reach millions of people, attracted the business world that used it for overturning pre-established advertising dogmas, mail-order sales, customer relationship management and many more. The web was a new powerful tool for bringing together buyers and sellers in low-cost ways.

Online communication besides previously mentioned counted one more important activity, which was file sharing. The tools created for this activity are general purpose and can be used to share a wide variety of content. This option of sharing almost every type of content and format raised controversy, since music files, software and later movies and videos were illegal to share, due to charges of theft of intellectual property, or even censorship. Numerous websites and search engines such as Bittorrent, Rapidshare etc that hosted illegal material were shut down in 2012, during a global action of ACTA, **Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement**, a multinational treaty for the purpose of establishing international standards for intellectual property rights enforcement. However, the signing of this treaty was stopped thanks to global networking of people in a form of global protest and petitions. Here for the first time so transparently everyone could sense the McLuhan's idea of global village, where a couple of online organizations and websites called upon their followers and branches to organize local city protests and ask for signatures and online support. On 11 February 2012, protests were held against ACTA in more than 200 European cities. On 21 February 2012, a news report noted that "many countries in Europe that have signed the treaty have set aside ratification in response to public outcry, effectively hampering the ratification and implementation of the treaty." Protests in Germany attracted over 10,000 participants, while up to 8,000 Bulgarians protested in Sofia. A world-wide petition at Avaaz collected over 2.5 million signatures since 25 January, and many more countries organized signings. Websites like 9gag and 4chan, together with social networks like Facebook and Twitter served as powerful platforms for cumulating the force of the common people, end users.

Social impact internet has made to the humanity can be seen in the new forums of social interaction and social relations people have now through social networking websites such as Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, Foursquare etc.

These social interactions that form virtual communities before were considered just that, virtual, however, today researchers find that these social ties are more often maintained both online and offline. This would imply that previous beliefs of internet being responsible for social isolation are not so firmly grounded. As a result of this disagreement there are ongoing debates concerning internet's role in social behavior of the modern population. Nonetheless, internet plays a huge role in the politics, journalism, philanthropy, and leisure, therefore representing an inevitable part of modern society's life.

### **The mediatization: Internet vs/feat Religion**

Mediatization in communication studies represents a process in which the media shapes the discourse of political communication as well as the society in which that communication takes place (Lilleker, 2008). The etymology of the term can be traced back to Aristotle in his considerations of various media of expression in the context of his Poetics, and is a term afterwards used by many theoreticians, most importantly, by Marshal McLuhan with his famous sentence that “the medium is the message”. Arguing that the medium is the message McLuhan created a fertile ground for the creation of interdisciplinary, but independent, science of the media, thus highlighting the powerful and unavoidable presence of the media in our everyday lives. The modernization of society does not solely relate to certain types of improvements. It can also related to technology and communication that are responsible for the development of the mass media that now shape whole societies (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999).

Mediatization was in the beginning regarded as a process in the political communication. However, Stig Hjarvard (2008) developed a concept of mediatization as a social process whereby the society is saturated and inundated by the media to the extent that the media cannot longer be thought of separated from other institutions within the society. Other institutions as a notion in this definition can be from social and cultural sphere, in particularly religious ones. Approaching mediatization as a process of shaping and framing communication in all spheres, including religion and spirituality, and taking into consideration the unavoidable place of media in today's lives, it is almost syllogistic that religion can't situate itself in “the media age” outside of mediatization.

Nick Couldry presumes that in the present-day media culture, media is staged as the “unquestioned centre of society” by media rituals, this refers to the relevance mediatization has also for religion: Any form of religion and spirituality that wants to be more than an individual experience of transcendent feeling has to be mediated and is thus marked through the process of mediatization.(Andreas Hepp & Veronika Krönert, 2008). Before modernization we could address church as a medium for religion, spoken word, later printed word, now we must refer to electronic media as the necessary means to communicate with believers.

In a society where a preacher has learned that he can use technology to break the time and space limitations of a physical church, in becoming a television preacher. One of the crucial problems of the Church in modern times of society getting faster and faster, constantly moving forward or backward is up for a debate, but still it forces people to be there in the same spatial and temporal coordinates limiting their reach to those who can physically attend. The TV preacher breaks these limitations allowing the message to reach people in different locations and with video recording to allow people to be reached who are not in the same time frame as the preacher. After a TV preacher it was only a matter of time before the 3D Church.

The globalization of media now is increasingly fragmented and deterritorialized. Because of this fragmentation of the market and deterritorialization religion and spirituality have to present themselves in the new media – internet, if they wish to be considered as relevant ‘belief offers’ either as a resource within a certain individualized belief community or as an offer for personal, again individualized beliefs (Andreas Hepp & Veronika Krönert, 2008). Youth today have a saying that “If you do not have a Facebook account, you do not exist” and “If it can not be found on Google it does not exist, or is irrelevant”. In relation to these sayings, and more importantly mediatization, religious offers have to be able to be found across different media. Nonetheless, this at first glance may refer to losing the exclusive space, the sacred space of communication - the Churches. The media with adjectives such as mass, popular, commercial do not relate to the possible new sacred space for mediating the religion and spirituality, which is why many debated over the shift from one medium to another that the religion should or should not take. Another issue was should religion even try to compete with other products, and belief offers, through improving self-representation, or better branding of itself. In order to brand itself

effectively religion must recognize the characteristics of the new medium and use the tools, instruments specific to both religion and internet. These characteristics/tools are: Community online, Identity online, Ritual online and Authority online, and they will be addressed in the following chapters.

### **Cyber religions, cyberspace, and communities**

David Holmes(2005) argues that the problem with studying the network communities or “virtual communities”, as they are often called, is that they can easily be rendered as metaphysical and abstract as the “personalized” relationships are concrete. Moreover, the various theories of virtual community, what Rheingold (1994) has called a “bloodless technological ritual”, can attain truly theological meanings as various theorists revel in the power, the totality and the unity of the universal condition which is said to promise.

Holmes (2005) also states that communication studies should not only examine interaction with mediums, which is surely of paramount importance in “post-social” society, but something of the metaphysics of such communities and of the theories about them needs to be examined.

If this metaphysical character of communities is taken in consideration when observing active audience in the new media surrounding, it almost syllogistically relates to the creation of a belief that internet is a deity or that the cyberspace is divine in nature.

In the populist interpretation of McLuhan, a certain “computopia” narrative is present, since not only the communication has speeded up, but “degree of separation” between persons has been reduced, creating the cyber community thus more dense. The existence of cyber community is relevant in a manner of connecting the world, through unification, caused by all of the information gathered and available to every user. Moreover, if we include what Watts (2000) claims that “within a significant chunk of the www every site could be reached from every other site through about four hotlinks”, it would imply that every user can reach specific but same information. Of course it should be taken in consideration that internet in the 2000 year wasn't as “wide” as it is today, however the model can be translated to today's situation. Which would ultimately imply that information on internet is both universal as it is specific, but nevertheless available to everyone. Users being exposed to all these information in

the cyber space through which they create their systems of belief or shape certain values of things reflects to the McLuhans “new universal community”<sup>18</sup> in the culture of technology which he compares to The Christian concept of the mystical body where all men as the body of Christ, however in this case the cyber-soul or the cyber-mind. However, not only McLuhan prejudiced and compared cyberspace with religion. Werkheim (1999) remarks that “in one form or another, a religious attitude has been voiced by almost all the leading champions of cyberspace”, Holmes (2005) explains that if we disregard whether or not the leading champions of cyberspace are “formal religious believers” Kevin Kelly, a writer for the “Wired” magazine sites that “again and again we find in their discussions of the digital domain a religious valorization of this realm”.<sup>19</sup>

However, certain critics have gone even further in drawing the correlation between the cyberspace and religion, for example, Michael Benedict (1991) describes it as New Jerusalem, where the Garden of Eden represents 'our state of innocence' and is a 'Heavenly city that holds our Wisdom and Knowledge', cyberspace thus exhibits a beauty and geometry from the Book of Revelations. Nevertheless, parallels haven't been drawn only from Christianity, Greek mythology also implies that immateriality is associated with spirituality.

The Internet is increasingly being conceptualized as a spiritual or sacramental space as people transport their spiritual and religious practices online (Campbell 2003).

The internet has been described as a communications medium, a computer system, a discourse (Agree 1998) and as a social network (Jones 1997). Yet the internet not only presents new possibilities for work and communicative tasks; it can also be conceptualized as reconnecting people with the spiritual side of life (Weirtheim 1999). Some researchers envision the internet as a new realm in which to experience the spiritual. Cobb argues that “Cyberspace can aid humanity's spiritual progression” by serving as an “important way station” on humanity's journey towards a greater spiritual evolution. The internet as a spiritual network that facilitates spiritual experiences and encounters or as sacramental space set apart for “holy use” enables people to describe online activities as part of their spiritual life (Campbell 2001).

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18 Arthur Kroker, Digital Humanism: The Processed World of Marshall McLuhan, <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=70#note 40>, (accessed on 25<sup>th</sup> August, 2012)

19 Margaret Wertheim, IS CYBERSPACE A SPIRITUAL SPACE?, [http://www.cybersociology.com/files/7\\_wertheim.html](http://www.cybersociology.com/files/7_wertheim.html), (accessed on 25<sup>th</sup> August, 2012)

Seeing the internet as a spiritual space recognizes the growing phenomenon of people using the Internet as part of their religious practices (Barna Research Group 1998).

One of the ways the Internet has functioned as a spiritual space is the birth of online spiritual communities. Since the mid 1990s the studies of online communities were focused on: the impact the Internet had on identity construction; the representation and enactment of gender; the experience of disembodiment; and the creation, and maintenance of boundaries in online groups (Dawson 2000; DiMaggio).

Online communities are “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form Webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold 1993). Online spiritual communities are groups formed with certain intentions that gather around the idea of faith and allow for two-way interaction through a variety of media (e-mail, Internet Relay Chat, ICQ). Every online spiritual community has its unique narrative that dictates its particular rituals and practices. These narratives, such as being a support network or worship space, bring cohesion and identity to these communities (Campbell 2001). Individuals that approach and form these online communities consider Internet technology as a tool, or to be more precise as a place for spiritual engagement.

## **Religion and the new media surrounding**

### **Belief**

The recognition of a belief as a phenomenon derived from Plato<sup>20</sup>, where he described knowledge in philosophical terms, as a “justified true belief”<sup>21</sup>. The relationship between belief and knowledge is justified in a notion that a belief is knowledge if the belief is true. Whether or not the belief is true depends on the justification for believing it is true by the believer. According to this notion the most common definition of a belief is that it represents a psychological state in which an individual

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20 Plato, Dialogue Theaetetus, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theaetetus\\_\(dialogue\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theaetetus_(dialogue)), (accessed on 1<sup>st</sup> August, 2012)

21 “*in order to know that a given proposition is true, one must not only believe the relevant true proposition, but one must also have justification for doing so ...*” Chisholm, Roderick (1982). “Knowledge as Justified True Belief”. *The Foundations of Knowing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

hold a proposition or premise to be true. However, an idea of false belief points out the problem that even if a believer is sincere in its belief, for example that pigs can fly, his strong belief does not make it knowledge, due to the fact that he either does not know, can not understand, or does not have enough information to create a true belief. False belief was the initial cap for epistemologists<sup>22</sup> Gettier<sup>23</sup> (1963) and Goldman<sup>24</sup> (1976) to question the notion of the “justified true belief”. Traditional opinion in the mainstream psychology concerning belief was that it is the simplest form of mental representation and therefore the core postulate of the conscious thought.

If we dissect the phenomena of a belief we see a subject, or the believer, and an object of belief, or the proposition. Beliefs essentially have different nature, so sometimes, the most widely spread division is on<sup>25</sup>:

- *Core beliefs* meaning the beliefs that are actively thought about.
- *Dispositional* beliefs meaning the beliefs that are ascribed to someone who has not thought about the issue. For example, if a question such as “do you believe pigs can fly when they drink red bull” is posed to a person, that person can answer they can not, even though that person may have never thought about that situation before.

An important aspect of a belief is how it is formed, and what is the relationship between different actions people take because of it? Some of the ways in which the belief is formed can be: forming of the beliefs in our childhood by taking in the beliefs that surround us; adopting the beliefs of the charismatic leader; repetition of certain beliefs through different mediums; or by physical trauma, most commonly in the head.

Our tendency is to internalize the beliefs of the people around us during our childhood. Definition of this or a standpoint is Albert Einstein famous quote that "Common sense is the collection of prejudices acquired by age eighteen." An example for forming belief in such way is the political belief that depends strongly on the political beliefs most common in the community where we live, or a further example that most individuals believe in the religion they were taught in childhood, more concretely that is practiced in their family, by the parents.

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<sup>22</sup> Epistemology is a science that explores the nature and scope of knowledge.

<sup>23</sup> <sup>△</sup> Gettier, E. L. (1963). "Is justified true belief knowledge?". *Analysis* **23** (6): 121–123.

<sup>24</sup> Goldman, A. I. (1967). "A causal theory of knowing". *The Journal of Philosophy* **64** (12): 357–372.

<sup>25</sup> Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/belief/>, (accessed on 17<sup>th</sup> August, 2012)

However beliefs formed in our childhood can be replaced by new beliefs adopted from a charismatic leader, even if they are completely different and perhaps not in our own self-interest they can induce related actions. Similar to this is the advertising industry that uses repetition as a way of forming beliefs. Also, the possibility of physical factor in changing beliefs is physical trauma. This represents the most radical way of changing or forming of certain beliefs.

Well aware of the processes by which a belief is formed, or how it can be manipulated, people tend to cling and act on them even though sometimes they may not be in their own self-interest. Anna Rowley<sup>26</sup> states in her leadership theory, that "You want your beliefs to change. It is the proof that you are keeping your eyes open, living fully, and welcoming everything that the world and people around you can teach you."

An important aspect of beliefs is the action taken upon a certain belief. Whence we can separate two different types of beliefs by which people take action: believe in, and believe that. "Believe in" as a concept treats two types of beliefs:

- Commendatory - an expression of confidence in a person or entity, as in, "I believe in his ability to do the job".
- Existential claim - to claim belief in the existence of an entity or phenomenon with the implied need to justify its claim to existence. It is often used when the entity is not real, or its existence is in doubt. "He believes in witches and ghosts" or "many children believe in fairies" are typical examples.<sup>27</sup>

Aside from "believe in" and "believe that" another form of false or bizzare beliefs is present, the so called "delusional beliefs", or delusions<sup>28</sup>, that affect people with mental health issues.

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26 Rowley, Anna (2007). *Leadership Therapy: Inside the Mind of Microsoft*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. p. 69

27 Macintosh, Jack. "Belief-in". *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*., 1994, p. 86.

28 Delusions are defined as beliefs in psychiatric diagnostic criteria in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders published by the American Psychiatric Association., <http://www.psych.org/>, (accessed on 15<sup>th</sup> August, 2012)



## **System of belief**

As previously explained we have different kinds of beliefs, so, for example they can be religious, philosophical, ideological or a combination of these. A set of mutually supportive beliefs creates what is known as a belief system. Jonathan Glover<sup>29</sup>, a philosopher, cites that beliefs are always a part of a belief system. Because of this, changing a system of beliefs would mean changing a number of particular beliefs that are strongly embedded in our life, which is why he considers it extremely difficult.

Since the majority of our beliefs comes from our childhood<sup>30</sup>, they are fostered by our parents or the community we live in, changing them would require extreme effort, and it still remains unanswered if it is possible. Glover compares changing belief systems with a metaphor of rebuilding a boat: "Maybe the whole thing needs re-building, but inevitably at any point you have to keep enough of it intact to keep floating."<sup>31</sup> Which would mean that people inevitably when trying to change the whole notion of their belief system, still leave certain traces of a former belief system but dressed in a new outfit. This process also happens when people continue to hold a certain belief. They fix to one particular belief and alter others around it.

## **Religion**

According to Kenneth Shouler, religion is a collection of cultural systems, belief systems, and worldviews that relate humanity to spirituality and, sometimes, to moral values. Religious belief represents a belief in a supernatural power that controls human destiny<sup>32</sup>. Basic perception of religious belief refers to a belief in the existence, characteristics and worship of a deity, deities or a supernatural force or values and practices centered on teachings of a spiritual leader. The difference between other belief systems and religion is the codification, and the tendency of religious beliefs to

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29 Jonathan Glover, podcast, <http://philosophybites.com/2011/10/jonathan-glover-on-systems-of-belief.html>, (accessed on 17<sup>th</sup> August, 2012)

30 Ibid. childhood i.e. around the age from 12 to 15 years.

31 "Jonathan Glover on systems of belief", Philosophy Bites Podcast, Oct 9 2011

32 religious belief. Dictionary.com. WordNet® 3.0. Princeton University.  
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/religious> belief (accessed: November 08, 2011)

focus on the ideas<sup>33</sup>. Many religions have narratives, symbols, traditions and sacred histories that are intended to give meaning to life, explain the origin of life or the universe (creationism), as well as, organized behaviors, clergy, holy places, scriptures, and a definition of what it means to become a member. Their other tendency is to derive morality, ethics, laws or even lifestyle from their ideas. Which is why the practice of a religion may include: rituals; sermons; commemorations; sacrifices; festivals; feasts; trance; initiations; funerary services; matrimonial services; meditation; prayer; music; art; dance; public service or other aspects of human culture.

The term religion is sometimes used as a synonym with faith or belief system. However, many argue that this is not correct since the essential difference that separates religion from a private belief is the social aspect behind it<sup>34</sup>. In the world today according to Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism is roughly around 4200 different religions, whilst 59% of the world's population is religious, 23% are not religious and 13% are atheists<sup>35</sup>.

Certain religions have been existent for hundreds of years and even though the society changes constantly, rapidly, their teachings, rituals, and beliefs have changed slightly. Nevertheless the instrument used for “spreading the thought” has changed accordingly to the technological development for example the invention of printing press, radio, television and now internet.

Existence of religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, which unite into one single moral community called a Church all those who adhere to them (Emile Durkheim) in the today's cyber-society which is highly influenced with scientific findings and thus technological development, raises questions of possible adaptations of traditional dogmas and rituals to the new media surrounding. In his book *The Elementary forms of the religious life*, Durkheim, analyzes religion as a social phenomenon, attributing its development to the emotional security attained through communal living.

Early humans according to Durkheim associated feelings of emotional security not

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33 Codification i.e. to arrange or systematize., <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/codification>, (accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> August, 2012)

34 Oxford Dictionaries mythology, <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/mythology> (accessed 9th September 2012 )

35 Durkheim, E. (1915) *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. London: George Allen & Unwin. Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism retrieved 24 August 2012

only with one another but also with objects in their environment. By doing so, he believed, humans ascribed sentiments and superhuman powers to these objects, thus leading to the beginning of totemism. The essence of religion for him according to the previously stated was “the sacred”, and that was the unifying force for all religions. Which would imply that in modern societies the individual has the right to become the new sacred phenomena, according to Durkheim.

The distinction should be made between the religious belief, or religion and superstition or philosophy. Both religion and superstition try to find meaning and attribute of certain chaotic events. Whilst difference between religion and philosophy lies in the way philosophy addresses these chaotic events or other in a critical and systematic approach relying on a rational argument. One of the possible and present characteristics of religion is a belief in the miraculous.

Different forms of religious belief are:

- Pluralism – is practiced by people whose beliefs make no distinction or endanger various faith systems. Their standpoint is that each belief is valid within a particular culture or thus community. For example they believe in only one supreme God, and besides him no other superhuman force exists, however, the scriptures for this god are the Jewish, Christian and Islamic religions. Which would mean that these cultures even though historically sometimes at war as a reason of different beliefs, are actually believing in the same God, but calling him different names.
- Syncretism – is a belief system that borrows a little from all other religions in order to create a custom made religion. People with syncretic belief system tend to mix for example certain elements of buddhism or zen with certain christian beliefs. Today with mixing of different almost opposite beliefs a notion of a salad-bar spirituality was born, meaning that people take a veggie/belief here and there, a bit from somewhere else and create something unique, suitable, justified and truthful only to them. Examples of syncretic religions are mostly new religious movements, or fiction based religions such as Jediism, Matrixism etc.
- Universalism – is mostly fostered between Islamic nations and fundamentalist Christians. It represents the belief that religion should be and is involved in

every aspect of our everyday life. For example, if the sun rises, god has caused it, if the crops are bad the God is punishing us etc. They believe science should be guided by religion, and most of the scientific axioms or laws are neglected or regarded as not true. Also, they are strongly convinced that only their belief is truthful and other beliefs are regarded as blasphemy. Historically, this system of belief was fostered by the pre-Socratic Athenians that regarded science, politics, culture and religion as not so easily distinctive since they all represented a part of the cumulative knowledge and wisdom available to the community.

- Systematization – is particularly manifested in buddhism. If the religion follows certain aspects, processes and teachings of the religion in question, it has good qualities, however, the differences or not fulfilling some teachings and ways represents bad aspects of that religion. This is noticeable more clearly in relation to different sects. Which means they have certain similarities whilst some things are different, or even totally opposite.

When addressing religion it is important to view its relation to other religions, since, as previously stated, there are thousands of different religious beliefs. Two basic ways in which a certain religion deals with differing doctrines and practices are<sup>36</sup>:

- Exclusivism – regards other religions as false beliefs, or as counterfeits and corruptions of the true faith.
- Inclusivism – regards other religions as similar, finding agreements and minimizing differences. However their religion is still regarded as the only ultimate true faith.

The rigidity of certain religions toward the changing of their ideas regarding the origins of life, man, universe, in spite of the scientifically proven findings, may be camouflaged by the modern use of new channels of communication with the believers. The problem with this lies in the concept and philosophy of internet. Some religions regarded internet as means to degrade morality of the people, and spread evil contents, information. However, when they realized the full potential of the World Wide Web they started using it as an instrument to criticize the same new technology and media they are using. This contradictory behavior is caused by the metamorphoses certain

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36 Religious tolerance, *How people view the status of religions other than their own*, [http://www.religioustolerance.org/rel\\_plur.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/rel_plur.htm) (accessed on 23rd August, 2012)

religions have to go through in order to maintain their believers in the new media environment. However, once they went online, and explored the available options, their “appetites” grew according to the needs of the believers. Thus, the creation of cyber-religions as a consequence of the new needs of the believers that conventional religious groups made of the Internet, represent the same old system of belief communicated to the believers in a form of online rituals and services.

Thus, the creation of cyber-religions as a consequence of the new needs of the believers that conventional religious groups made of the Internet, represent the same old system of belief communicated to the believers in a form of online rituals and services.

New needs of the believers actually represent the consequence of the crossover from passive receivers to active believers. This directly correlates to one of the hypothesis of this thesis that the “Emerging of the new media has developed new socio-cultural needs of the consumers and inspired them to take a more active role in all everyday rituals, making consumers becoming creators”. The concept of the consumers becoming creators is the phenomenon of the active audience.

Active audience is a theory created by David Morley<sup>37</sup> in the 1980s that perceives how people receive and interpret media messages in different ways, usually according to factors such as age, ethnicity, social class etc<sup>38</sup>. More precisely this theory explains what do people do with the media, opposite to the notion of passive audience that is easily influenced by it. It would essentially mean that people make more active decisions about how to use the media (Littlejohn, 1999). Earlier theories promoted the idea of the audience being easily manipulated by the media, giving them insufficient credit for selection, interpretation, and use of media content.

Frank Biocca (as cited in Littlejohn, 1999) discussed five characteristic of the active audience implied by the theorist in this genre:

- Selectivity - active audiences are considered to be selective in the media they choose to use.

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<sup>37</sup> David Morley – a professor of communication at Goldsmith, University of London, his research concerns micro-practices of media consumption and macro questions such as the role of media technologies in constituting the ‘electronic landscapes’ within which we live.

<sup>38</sup> David Morley’s Study of the Nationwide Audience (1980)- Daniel Chandler, January 1997 (notes from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth)

- Utilitarianism - active audience are said to use media to meet particularly need and goals.
- Intentionality - which implies the purposeful use of media content?
- Involvement, or effort - meaning, audiences are actively attending, thinking about, and using the media.
- Impervious to influence - or not very easily persuaded by the media alone.

These five characteristics show the theoretical foundation of the creation of new needs of the consumers, and their ever more medium literacy, where they selectively chose the medium thereafter interpreting the message in to them unique way.

Since, internet users today, are used to turn to search engines when they need information, or ask other internet users through specialized “question & answers” websites or social networks when they need a solution for their personal problems, it was only natural and necessary to provide that type of websites and possibilities for religion. This is why, the internet as an open source offers limitless information about religious views, beliefs and arguments at the click of a mouse. However the accuracy of some of the information can be debatable and malicious. Another problem that the believers encounter is the viruses and spyware that are more present at religious websites than for example - porn websites<sup>39</sup>.

### **The birth of New Religious Movements**

The development of technology has affected the society greatly. With the start of new religious movements it was acknowledged that the society is changing not only physically, socially, politically or economically but culturally and spiritually as well. Dominant religious cultures, such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism for example, now have new denominations or completely new systems of belief. These are either referred to as denominations, cults or sects. There are numerous examples of these new movements<sup>40</sup>. Also, this has created a list of neopagan movements, such as

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39 The raw story, *Religious websites riskier than porn for online viruses: study*, <http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2012/05/01/religious-websites-riskier-than-porn-for-online-viruses-study/>, (accessed on 30<sup>th</sup> August, 2012)

40 List of new religious movement, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_new\\_religious\\_movements](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_new_religious_movements), (accessed 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2012 )

Heathenism<sup>41</sup>, or Celtism<sup>42</sup>. These new movements can lead to the dispersion of believers, or people crossing over from dominant religions believers to cults or sects. This is probably caused by the new needs of the modern society affected by the technological development, because new religious movements adhered to those needs with new beliefs, and teachings custom made for the newly established media environment.

NRM can signify a wide range of movements such as novel approaches to pre-existent spirituality and religion. However it also includes new communities that might as well be formed around old needs or beliefs, for instance from the ancient times. Nevertheless, thanks to this new medium, the internet, these needs have finally found the channel to satisfy themselves through forming of groups. These groups are made out of individuals who believe their personal social identity differs from the mainstream society.

Some of the NRM have been accepted as official religions since they differ from dominant religious cultures in different ways of understanding certain terms such as leadership; authority; concepts of the individuality, family, and gender; teachings; organizational structures; etc. Therefore they are considered as denominations, and accepted both by the law as official religions and by the believers since they adhere to their newly formed needs, but are still part of the peripheral sphere of the dominant religious cultures, and hence not that radically different and unacceptable by mainstream cultures.

The radically different NRMs however, struggle to become recognized officially by the government or the society. Even though some of them gather a large number of believers they are still not officially recognized by the public. These movements are regarded as false religions, and their characteristics will be addressed more later in the thesis.

Most of these new movements emerged and gathered believers thanks to the charismatic leadership behind the teachings. Rodney Stark and William Sims

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41 List of neopagan movements, Heathenism,  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Neopagan\\_movements#Heathenism\\_.28Germanic.29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Neopagan_movements#Heathenism_.28Germanic.29) , (accessed 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2012 )

42 List of neopagan movements, Celtism,  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Neopagan\\_movements#Celtism\\_.28Celtic.29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Neopagan_movements#Celtism_.28Celtic.29) , (accessed 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2012 )

Bainbridge in their book *Theory of religion* explained the formation of these movements, cults, or sects by describing the four models<sup>43</sup>:

- The psycho-pathological model – where the leader has psychological problems and whence develops the cult in order to resolve his own problems.
- The entrepreneurial model – is when the leader has previous knowledge or has done the research on what is wrong and appealing in other religions, thus creating a religion that would be interesting and appealing to believers, answering the needs other religions do not. Here the leader acts like the entrepreneur offering to the consumers a new better and improved product more attractive than the pre-existing ones.
- The social model – is formed through a way of social isolation, where the members reduce the intensity of bonds with the rest of the people that are not the members of the cult, in the meanwhile improving the bonds and relations with the cult members through sharing the same beliefs and performing certain rituals.
- The normal revelations model – is when the cult is created by the founders revelation to the believers of a natural phenomena interpreted as an act of supernatural, it is either if he contributes his own creativity as of divine nature.

Nevertheless, the question that arises from these models is why do believers join these cults in the first place. Jeffrey Hadden a sociologist of the new religious movements summarizes the reasons why do people join NRMs, and why is the affiliation to a community relevant in today's society for the mental health. He point out 9 reasons<sup>44</sup> for joining the NRM:

1. Belonging to groups is a natural human activity;
2. People belong to religious groups for essentially the same reasons they belong to other groups;
3. Conversion is generally understood as an emotionally charged experience that leads to a dramatic reorganization of the convert's life;

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43 Stark, Rodney; Bainbridge, William (1996). *A Theory of Religion*. Peter Lang Publishing. pp. 155

44 Hadden, Jeffrey K. *New Religious Movements Lectures*, University of Virginia, Department of Sociology. [http://www.prolades.com/religion/soc257\\_Why\\_Join\\_NRMs.htm](http://www.prolades.com/religion/soc257_Why_Join_NRMs.htm), (accessed on 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2012)



4. Conversion varies enormously in terms of the intensity of the experience and the degree to which it actually alters the life of the convert;
5. Conversion is one, but not the only reason people join religious groups;
6. Social scientists have offered a number of theories to explain why people join religious groups;
7. Most of these explanations could apply equally well to explain why people join lots of other kinds of groups;
8. No one theory can explain all joining or conversions;
9. What all of these theories have in common is the view that joining or converting is a natural process.

Once you become a member there are basically three ways you can leave the movement, or religion. Of course, the first one would be that a member himself decides to leave the community. The second way would be to be expelled from the community for not respecting the teachings or having a negative behavior according to the movement canons. The third is the most extreme way, used for a sort of hypnotic behavior of devouring the free mind of the believer, and that is if the other non cult members, usually friends or family of a member decides to take action and “save” a person from the religion's evil doing through an intervention such as Exit counseling<sup>45</sup> or deprogramming<sup>46</sup>.

New media allowed new religious movements to develop a term called cybersectarianism that represents a new organizational form and a model of affiliating to the community. Since, this is not a religion but a model numerous religions use it as a way of functioning and gathering believers. Cybersectarianism represents "highly dispersed small groups of practitioners that may remain largely anonymous within the larger social context and operate in relative secrecy, while still linked remotely to a larger network of believers who share a set of practices and texts, and often a common devotion to a particular leader. Overseas supporters provide funding and support; domestic practitioners distribute tracts, participate in acts of resistance, and share information on the internal situation with outsiders. Collectively, members and

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45 Exit counseling is an intervention designed to persuade an individual to leave a group perceived to be a cult, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exit\\_counseling](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exit_counseling), (accessed on 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2012)

46 Deprogramming is an attempt to force a person to abandon allegiance to a religious, political, economic, or social group, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deprogramming>, (accessed on 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2012)

practitioners of such sects construct viable virtual communities of faith, exchanging personal testimonies and engaging in collective study via email, on-line chat rooms and web-based message boards."<sup>47</sup>

### **Recognition of the religious use of the internet**

Religion online in many aspects gained public attention through two magazine articles. "Technopagans: may the astral plane be reborn in cyberspace" in Wired (Davis, 1995) and Time's "Finding God on the Web" (Chama, 1996) spotlighted the mass media's first recognition that something new was happening as spiritual ideas and practices were being readily imported online by Internet users. Followed by numerous other comments and articles the 1990s were fruitful for discussion on this topic in the emerging information society.(Campbell, 2006)

*"For many signing on to the internet is a transformative act. In their eyes the web is more than just a global tapestry of personal computers. It is a vast cathedral of the mind, a place where ideas about God and religion can resonate, where faith can be shaped and defined by a collective spirit.(Chama, 1996)*

Many theoreticians have also approached the topics of technology reconnecting people with spiritual beliefs (Cobb, 1998; Weirtheim, 1999), adaptations of traditional religious practices online (Zaleski, 1997), and identifying new religious expressions (Davis, 1998).

*Bauwen's survey of spirituality and technology (1996) highlighted three common "spiritual attitudes" towards computer networks by describing technology as "The God project", "Electric Gaia", or "Sacramental Cyber-space".*

*Helland (Helland,2000) then presented a popular distinction that has been deployed by many researchers in this area:*

- *religion-online: that imports traditional forms of religion online*

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47 Patricia M. Thornton, "The New Cybersects: Resistance and Repression in the Reform era. " In Elizabeth Perry and Mark Selden, eds., *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance* , Routledge, 2003, pp. 149-50.

- *online-religion: adapts religion to creating new forms of networked spiritual interactions.*

Religion online has a tendency of conceptualizing the internet as traditional media with an influence of spreading the message in “one to many” fashion. Interpreting the internet as a hierarchical structure where the top influences the bottom, or in this case the congregation influences the end-users therefore fails to fulfill the full potential of the internet. These type of limited action representing a controlled environment where traditional communication is used to relay information concerning a religion.

Whilst, online religion recognizes the potential of the internet as a medium and uses it to its benefit. Using new forms of communication regarded as unstructured, open and non-hierarchical interaction with the believers offers one a new sensual experience of a religion outside the traditional religious structures. Online religion therefore uses the internet as a tool and platform for s online sermons, offers of healing prayers, religious counseling and faith sharing.

The first religion to use the “religious tool” of internet was roman Catholicism when in 1995 they have uploaded a website for the Vatican. Following Christianity Islam has created a so called *ummah* meaning Muslim brotherhood through Internet, that has been incredibly significant to the spreading of the Muslim thought and teachings, but also for practicing rituals and listening to religious sermons. Gabriel Faimau has in 2009 conducted a survey<sup>48</sup> on Internet use involving 81 Indonesian-speaking Catholic missionaries from the Divine Word Missionaries who are working in more than 50 countries.

The findings of this survey were more than interesting. One of the findings related to the use of internet for the preparing of the sermon used for spiritual formation of the people they are responsible for, and out of 81 participants, 84 percent indicated that they have used information from it to prepare their sermons. Out of this percentage 48.1 percent of the participants indicated that they always use it on a regular basis and another 40.7 percent indicated that though not on a regular basis, they do frequently use it for preparing sermons. Besides using the internet as a preparation tool, 47 percent of the participants use it as a way of dispersing their teachings to others by

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48 Gabriel Faimau, *The Internet: A new venue for religion*, 2009, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2009/01/24/the-internet-a-new-venue-religion.html> (accessed on 9th September, 2012)

publishing their sermons or writings online. Results regarding the believers and their participation online, was also incredibly high, meaning that 93.8 percent said they normally read or listen to the online sermons.

Important part of the religious use of the internet, besides publishing materials online through blogs, or webpages, or using it as a source of information is the use of social networks. Almost all of the participants, or to be exact 95.1 percent, said they have made use of the online social networking facilities for faith sharing or spiritual counseling.

Predictions of internet demising religion have proven wrong over the years. the internet has not only allowed geographical dispersion of religion, and overcoming the boundaries of space and time, but it has also crossed the religious boundary as well. Historically traditional religions have been extremely hierarchical in structure, and the internet with its main characteristic of interactivity has succeeded in making this structure more horizontal than it ever was. Even though some consequences can be felt due to this flattening of the structure, that resulted for example in the creation of new religious movements, or new denominations, or most importantly internet based religions, still it has a progressive notation to it.

In the future, it is presumable that the difference between online religion and religion online will become non – existent, or so slight that the distinction itself will not be relevant.

The focus of this thesis will not be religion online but online religion. Nonetheless examples and practices of religion online will be referenced in order to explain the origins and inspiration for some of the online religious movements.

## **Religious activities online and various ways of engaging users/believers**

To online religion it is obvious that we can use the internet for more than just find information about religion. Most of the activities besides information seeking, is talking about it, whether it is in real time, or posting an opinion on a webpage for others to read and possibly comment. In fact if internet is conceptualized as a cyber reality it can provide a community with almost all of the usual or traditional aspects of religious activities and more.

Internet users that wish to practice or explore religion online can do so in different forms and with various goals. A classification of the forms of religion online has been made by Heidi Campbell:

- Gathering religious information online – is the most frequent activity between the religious practitioners according to the Barna Research Group(2001). Listening to archived religious teaching, reading online devotionals, buying religious products, seeking spiritual advice which would all represent solitary actions. Religious practitioners that use internet as a source for finding information on religious topics are commonly called “religion surfers”.
- Online worship and rituals – can be practiced for example in cyberchurches and cybertemples that are starting to emerge in a form of websites. The iChurch, for example, resembles the initiative of SecondLife a virtual cyberspace imitating real life online. In these cyberchurches you choose and create your own personal avatar, with whom you enter the virtual church where you encounter other online believers and the priests. However, a question that puzzles upon seeing these avatars in a virtual church singing, dancing, or praying to the Supreme, is can this simulated worship of computer generated iconic figures operated by the participants in games and other virtual reality site, simply called avatars, provide the same sensation one feels when going to the real church, and touching priests hand, or singing with other believers in the congregation. This is not solely reserved for Christian faith, Japanese Culture Club's Shinto virtual shrine, also exists, or the virtual pilgrimage to the Jerusalem, or celebration of Passover that helps Jewish people practice faith in the privacy of their homes. Depending on the religious community and their

dogma or teachings in general, these rituals vary in shapes. Some are constituted as traditional rituals, such as saying the prayer out loud while reading the lines from the screen, or something similar, whilst others may be just copy paste-ing certain information, or sharing of materials, multimedia, works of art, etc. For example The Church of Google states that through using the search engine and browser google you are praying and worshiping to the divine Google God.

- Online recruitment and missionary activities – are widely spread over internet. A person who recruits believers is called “e-vangelist” and for this profession numerous textbooks and guidelines have been written, with focuses on, for example, “surf evangelism in online conferences” or through visiting websites, for visiting chat rooms or joining e-mail lists. One of the creative examples the Christian church has had was in the year 2002 when they started the Online Missionary Project. This project was developed when the church acknowledged the importance of online religious communities. Online communities are social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationship in cyber space”. (Rheingold, 1993) The Online missionary project described clubbing as an experience where many young people go to seek “spiritual enlightenment”. This was the reason the project was organized in Ibiza the heaven for parties, and was executed in the clubs. Project missionaries would work as DJs and promote the church through interactions with the clubbers, handing them leaflets with web page address of the project, so that they could continue their spiritual guidance and keep the connection they had the previous night. The project was very unsuccessful since most of the clubbers forgot to visit the webpage, lost the leaflet, or visited the webpage to find people they had met yesterday. Even though the project had 24/7 employed spiritual guides the services this project offered to the Ibiza clubbing scene weren't recognized as popular.
- Online religious community – represents an online group that interacts with believers, separated by geography, who are sharing spiritual connection or conviction. These communities can be formed by an individual, an “e-vangelist”, a church or denomination. The difference between online religious

community and cyberchurch for example is the two-way interaction they provide. Technology used by these communities vary from, e-mails, internet relay chat, forums, msn groups, skype or any other form of interactive form of communication that internet offers. However according to Campbell(2006) three things are common to all these communities and that is experience, interaction and connection.

- Providing pastoral care – is mostly targeted towards youth. Benefits of this system are not having face to face communication, if it serves as a problem to some, and long distance help, if a person to whom the care is provided to does not live or is not able to come to the church or place where the pastor is. Also, peer pressure can be both a reason for receiving pastoral and for not going to church. Which is why providing pastoral care through instant messaging such as, msn, skype, or other chat programs is convenient both for both parties.

Questions raised concerning internet and religion, and practicing religion online, that resulted in significant examples and studies have been categorized by Campbell in 9 themes. Each of these topics represents a correlation between itself and religion and internet as an entity:

- theology/ spirituality – is cyber space sacred, and does it represent a sacred journey or a sacred network, due to it's interconnectivity and mysticism, non-material nature, imitating and repackaging the idea of Heaven?
- religion – defining the difference between online religion and religion online, or to be more precise, reading sacred texts online, finding information through different sources, compared to practicing religion online in a cyber church or a shrine.
- morality/ ethics – Christian tradition raised this question a lot which are noted in the works of Houston(1998) where he argues on ethical issues surrounding virtual reality, and an existence of virtual morality as well in the times of technology development and post modernity.
- practical/ ministry applications – researching about ways of possible recruitment, habitus of the users etc. “We must enter the world of cyber seekers. We must learn about them and from them to understand how they

respond to the working of this new medium... we must become salt and light in cyberspace.” (Andrew Careaga, 2001)

- religious traditions – exploring different religious traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam and New Religious Movements including a vast number of other religions, have been a focus of many research papers. These religion specific studies examine the need for religious expression in the use of internet and human encounter.
- community – how a community is formed? The question of common identity or theology? And the most crucial question for this thesis as well – the creation of religious communities not found offline?
- identity – examining the differences between the common identity of the group, and individual identity.
- authority/ power – is internet activity of churches going to affect the traditional hierarchy and structure of the church, or maybe create a new model of authority, roles and structure.
- ritual – examining forms of ritual transfer on the internet.



## **The mapping of Online religions**

Sociologist Peter Berger stated that religion represented a “sacred canopy” that one covered nearly every aspect of our lives, and that gradually with the society developing and science that canopy got replaced with secular institutions. This idea of secular things replacing religion gets even more interesting when considering internet that fills up a majority of everyday processes today, both in business and in private life. The notion of internet not only being a sacred place in which the existing traditional religions can habitate but as a deity itself supersede conventional religious communities. Jim Gilliam once an evangelic Christian discovered in the midst of his devastating cancer treatment a new community, formed through blogging and his online interactions as a political activist. Gilliam was on the brink of dying when his online blogger friends decided to do something and start an initiative and petition to save his life through finding a suitable donor. When Gilliam realized that his online community rallied to help him get the double-lung transplant that saved his life, he said, “That’s when I truly found God. God is just what happens when humanity is connected.” He further states “I have faith in people, I believe in God and the Internet is my religion.” His explanation of this 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomena is that the church, in the ideal times, was the place where you swapped recipes, got a pulse about current issues, caught up on gossip, made friends, sought solace, learned how to raise your kids and connected with the force most meaningful to you, and now, that sounds like what you might do on Facebook.

Gilliam, of course, is not the first one to proclaim internet as a deity, God. Markus Davidsen a PhD researcher in the field of fiction based religions tried to make a categorization of online new religious movements on internet, dividing online religions on joke/parody religions and fiction-based religions. His categorization lacks another form of internet based religions, where internet itself is considered a deity.

The following represent internet based new religious movement, as religions recent in origins, that have been created using the internet as its primary means of expression and communication:

The Jedi Knight religion and Matrixism are two prime examples of internet based new religious movements. However they were based on the work of fiction therefore a categorization of internet based religions is necessary.

The following is an attempt to classify existing dominant new online religious movements:

**Fiction based** or as some refer to them post-modern religions represent an important subcategory of the new online religious movements. The term fiction based derives from the notion that these religions have grown out of a religion embedded in a work of fiction. Markus Davidsen, highlights Jediism, as the best example, accompanied by Matrixism and a group inspired by the Lord of The Rings.

**Jediism** – is an order of warrior monks portrayed in the “Star Wars” movies made by George Lucas. The jediist movement is compiled out of several independent groups, without the central leadership. Their beliefs and symbolism have parallels in certain branches of Buddhism, and their supreme deity is the Force. The definition and the understanding of the Force is not unified between the believers has the numerous branches, that correlate with differences in values and ritual practices. Even though Jediism started as an American phenomenon it has a world spread coverage now. Several countries have recognized it as a religious body, including the United States, Canada and New Zealand. In Serbia, for example, in Census of population, done in 2002, there were around 3000 Jedis, now that number must have doubled since on official facebook page of the Serbian Jedi Movement (Srpski Dzedajski Pokret) there are around 7000 likes. The Jediism in a way represent a salad bar spirituality as well since it is common for the Jedi followers to be refered to as Muslim Jediist, or Pagan, or in Serbia Ortodox Jediist. Therefore Jediism should be considered as a syncretic religion that combines the best from the world's religion according to its followers.

**Matrixism or The Path of One** is based on the movie The Matrix, and was established in 2004, now there are around 16,000 members. It is also a syncretic religion, however they recall on the Baha'i book from 1912 named "The Promulgation (starting) of Universal (complete international) Peace" that mentions the “matrix”. Even so their prime books are three Matrix motion pictures. In Matrixism four beliefs called "The Four Tenets (rules) of Matrixism" are sacred. The four rules are: 1) Belief in the prophecy of the One. 2) Use of psychedelics (mind expansion medicine) as sacrament. 3) Seeing the relative nature of the world. 4) Acting by the rules of one of the world's

religions. The sign for Matrixism is 赤, the Japanese kanji for the word "red", that was used in the computer game "Enter the matrix". The color red also signifies a "red pill" that when taken enables one to see that which is true. The followers believe that the "real" world as we know it is a hoax pulled on us by robots, or other beings and that the only way of seeing the truth is taking the red pill, or a substitute in a form of magic mushrooms, acid etc.

**Otakukin** – are followers of a belief that their existence is somehow involved with/reincarnated from the souls of anime/manga/video game characters.

**Science based religions** in this categorization would represent systems of belief founded on the premise that technology and science is of divine nature.

**Channelology** – represents a religion and a cult studying connections in nature and believing in the divine nature of black holes. They believe everything is connected in a vast network of webs and energy, and that the center of the universe is a black hole from which everything is trying to escape.

**Technotarian** – or Technological Libertarian is someone who believes that technological innovation and the Internet are best governed by free market principles. The use of this term started on a Conference called LAUNCH in 2011 as a way to describe people on the internet who believe in the fundamental rights of individuals to be free, have free speech, fight hypocrisy and stand behind logic, technology and science over religion, political structure and tradition. The followers of this religion are people who build and support things like Wikileaks, Anonymous, Linux and Wikipedia.

**Noob Religion** – a variation of the 1337 religion as well, worships the number in odd rituals. The believers refer to one another as 1337 which is a godly feature. It is associated with hackers, and tech lovers.

**Religious or related act on the internet** – would represent a behavior that through common expression through induction became a general act, or a stereotyped act. A person acting in a certain manner on the internet with religious insinuations also becomes stereotyped. The following are the most dominant and generally known acts and behavior relating to religion online:

**Patus** – is an act of posting a status on facebook or blog that only involves a religious quote with intention of attracting religious girls.

**Bevets'd** – is a phenomenon of a discussion about religion that has devolved into a pointless shouting match or flamewar (hostile and insulting interaction between Internet users).

**Godfart** – is an act or more precisely a question posed by one actor in a discussion to others that discontinuates the communication due to its difficulty to answer.

**Gawd** – even though a comedic pronunciation of the word God, mostly used as a satire for southern US accent is used as a personal means by users to disrespect and ridicule religion and church.

**Religion-holing** – is an act of technological or personal isolation, even representing real life acts of mayhem, that by the religious practitioner is considered to be made by a secret organization or a group that wish to brake down the subject in aggressive oppression in a way he believes is accidental.

**e-Vangelist** - A person spreading the word of their religion through the internet and cyberspace. In use is also a term of **Evangelist 2.0** due to the intention of establishing interaction and conversation.

**e-Christian** - A Christian person that defends Christ or the Christianity from criticism in online discussions. Pejorative description of e-christian is his ignorance of fundamental scientific concepts, lack of logically valid arguments, accompanied by constant quotations of the Bible.

**Netaphor** – is an internet glitches or error messages that mimic religion, philosophy or other concepts from real life. For example when the error message sais "contact the 'Web Master'.

**Dake-bonoism** – is a term used to stop religious discussions with fundamentalist and charismatic Christians that tend to simplify Christian dogma somehow managing to complicate it.

**Sidewalkerism** – is an internet non-religion, or a spoof where as a way of recruiting fictional members, believers offer a free toaster without actually delivering it.

**Emotion based religions** – can be described as religions derived from the basic concept of emotion driven belief.

**Pugnatheism** – is a portmanteau (a combination of two, or more, words or morphemes into one new word) of 'pugnacious' and 'atheism'. This belief represents aggressive atheism, and sites that its followers are automatically superior to anyone who believes in any kind of religion, thus justifying verbal abuse of other believers. Most of the statements presenting pugnatheism are based on the work of Richard Dawkins. Whence practicing this religion is manifested in regular worship of Dawkins.

**Haterism** – is a religion formed by the haters, individuals who openly show hatred towards certain things.

**Florindu** – is a small religion founded in 2009 by Florinda and Florinda's doggy. Florindus believe in violence, sexual acts and internet addictions. They worship the Florindu god who is called Florinda. The rituals they perform are simply conversations transmitted through the nose. This religion is targeted at younger people.

**Joke/Parody religions (internet spoof-religion)** – are started by individuals or small communities as a practical joke that gained followers who firmed its position on the web evolving into a community of believers. Some of these religions started as Anti-Christianity based religions with a basic notion of ridiculing or attacking Christianity.

**Clicktivism** - The act or habit of using the internet, through websites, online petitions, mass email campaigns etc., as a primary means of influencing public opinion on matters of politics, religion or other social concerns.

**Ceiling Catist's** - internet users who believe that the internet meme "Ceiling cat" is a true god.

**Discordinism** – in its core is a pagan religion based on Eris Greek goddess of chaos and confusion. It was founded by Maliclyps the Younger that states this is a very philosophical 'religion disguised as a joke disguised as a religion' at its basis is the concept that there are no rules unless we choose to invent them.

**The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster** – is one of the most widespread parody religions also known as Pastafarianism. The founder Bobby Henderson created the religion in 2005 in response to the Kansas State Board of Education's decision to require the teaching of intelligent design as an alternative theory to biological evolution. The Flying Spaghetti Monster is said

to be invisible and undetectable. Their creationism theory involves the Monster creating the universe "after drinking heavily." The belief is that the FSM planted all evolutionary evidence to test the faith of believers, and that he has the ability to change scientific measurements by reaching out with His Noodly Appendage. Their belief system is defined by Pastafarian heaven that contains beer volcanoes and a stripper factory whilst hell has stale beer and the strippers with VD. Pirates are considered to be "absolute divine beings" and Henderson's original letter included a correlation between global shrinking number of pirates since the 1800s and global warming, earthquakes, hurricanes, and other natural disasters.

**The Reformed Church of the Alfredo** has been created by the breakoff group of Pastafarians. The differences are that ninjas are the truly divine beings, The deity is a sauce Alfredo, as opposed to marinara, and the rituals differ from Pastafarians.

**The Church of the Holy Donut** was created by Bernie Ward, a nighttime talk radio host on KGO 810 AM in San Francisco, as a parody on conservative religious zealots in the US. He founded the congregation on the premise that "all religions are based on dough."

**Invisible Pink Unicorn** - (IPU) is a goddess satire of theistic beliefs, that is both pink and invisible. Due to its invisibility no one can prove it is non-existent. Correlation to other traditional religions can also be found in the evil deity named the Purple Oyster (of Doom).

**Russell's Teapot or the Celestial Teapot** founded on the principles proposed by Bertrand Russell regarding the burden of proof for god's existence. He proclaimed that a teapot was orbiting the sun between the Earth and Mars and that if such a teaching was found in the ancient text it would be taken as truth to some, and thought at school.

**Kibology** – is a parody religion of Scientology. It was founded in 1989 by James "Kibo" Parry and his friends. They tend to follow internet "mad scientists" and "crackpots."

**The Landover Baptist Church** – is a fictional Baptist church in Iowa that promotes its beliefs through a website. They seek to parody fundamentalist

Christianity and the Religious Right. It was founded by an atheist Chris Harper and is owned by Americhrist, Ltd. Their sacred texts are published in a book entitled "Welcome to Jesusland (Formerly the United States of America): Shocking Tales of Depravity, Sex, and Sin Uncovered by God's Favorite Church, Landover Baptist."

**Last Thursdayism** (or Tuesdayism, or Wednesdayism) - is a parody of omphalism that represents a belief that God must have created the Earth with mountains, canyons, animals, humans etc. and since the science can not prove the exact time of creation and the absolute truth this is the only sacred truth. Which is why they believe that every thursday God creates the earth but with an appearance of being old. There is also a modern incarnation of this religion that proclaims that "Queen Maeve the Housecat" created the universe Last Thursday and will destroy it Next Thursday, only to save those who were nice to cats.

**OBJECTIVE: Ministries** - are a parody for Christian fundamentalism, even though at first glance they resemble a Christian organization, this fact has fooled a lot of accidental christian believers.

**The Great Pumpkin** - is a figure from the Peanuts comic strip that appears only on Halloween. It is a parody of Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, with some interpretations of being a metaphor for Christian evangelism.

**Human god based religions** – when the Supreme Being, the God, is a famous person.

**Norriscism** - a religion created in 2005 during the Chuck Norris's internet boom. The religion is based around worshipping Chuck's amazing roundhouse kicks to the face and everyday prayer (watching "Walker Texas Ranger").

**Dirgolicism** - a religion based around a cartoon artist Roman Dirge! That started in the town of Arlington, Washington. It has a few but strong believers.

**Jhonenism** – is another religion based around a cartoon artist formed in Washington as well. Jhonen Vasquez! Is the name of the divine artist.

**Pellsibubb** – represents the very secret word of God, and was started in Sweden, by a prophet/god who has the sole right to call himself the Pellsibubb because of his aura that connect people making them positive, and his power to stop war and hate just by passing by.

**Dudeism** is also a newly founded religion, even though its founders believe that through the ages this idea existed in one form or the other. The earliest form of dudeism known to them was the original form of Chinese Taoism. The gospel of this religion is as stated on their website: "Down through the ages, this "rebel shrug" has fortified many successful creeds – Buddhism, Christianity, Sufism, John Lennonism and Fo'-Shizzle-my-Nizzlism. The idea is this: Life is short and complicated and nobody knows what to do about it. So don't do anything about it. Just take it easy, man. Stop worrying so much whether you'll make it into the finals. Kick back with some friends and some oat soda and whether you roll strikes or gutters, do your best to be true to yourself and others – that is to say, abide." This religion is mostly based on a movie character of the Big Lebowski.

**Internet as a deity based religions** – believe that internet is a deity itself.

**Pandatheistic Randomism** - internet to this religion is considered as Vatican is to catholics, form or praying ritual and religious practice is users adding their own text to the Great book. The most active follower is Dont Panic 6x9 who makes images and relentlessly gathers followers. Voted most likely to be next Jim Jones<sup>49</sup>.

**Dlociclitianity** - believes in the divine existence of Myspace, thus the followers are worshipping or having faith in Myspace.

**Scapology** - The religion that believes that the internet is a greater power than any "God."

**Church of Emacs** - The Church of Emacs was started by Richard Stallman and is dedicated to the popular unix text editor emacs. There is an ongoing opposition between emacs and a newer Cult of vi, which is dedicated to another popular unix text editor - vi.

Internet as a deity based religions represent the focus of this thesis, since the instrument the medium itself is a god, according to their belief. Aside from previously mentioned Pandatheistic randomism, Dlociclitianity and Scapology, three religions have emerged as the best and most developed concept of internet as a deity. These

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49 Jim Jones was held responsible for the mass suicide of 39 members of Heaven's Gate in March 1997. This has led to public fears about the presence of "spiritual predators" on the world wide web.



religions have been the most visible amongst others:

- Kopimism – the first officially recognized internet based religion.
- The Church of Google – a controversial religion that was founded by a marketing expert.
- The Church of Reality – the most philosophically elaborated religion.

Before approaching these internet based religions more elaborately it is needed to mention that an instruction manual for creating your own religion is existent on the internet by various authors. Some of the main elements that one should consider about when starting a religion are<sup>50</sup>:

- First you find a prophet.
- Define your deity, divine;
- Choose the divine artifacts: arks, plates, things like that;
- Narrate creation mythology;
- apocalyptic/end of the world as we know it dogma;
- State rites/ceremonies/symbols;

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50 How to start your own religion: <http://www.instructables.com/id/How-To-Start-Your-Own-Religion/>, <http://www.wikihow.com/Start-a-Religion>, <http://jimmythejock.hubpages.com/hub/How-to-Start-a-New-Religion>, (all have been accessed on 9<sup>th</sup> September, 2012)

## Case studies :

In this Chapter, the goal is to analyze and present three cases of internet based religions, with a focus on internet being of divine nature. Information about these three churches has been collected from their official websites, and available online interviews.

### The Church of Google

#### Belief system:

The Church of Google was founded on the belief that the search engine Google is the closest humankind has ever come to directly experiencing an *actual* God (as typically defined – the one Supreme Being, the creator and ruler of the universe<sup>51</sup> ). The explanation for this system of a belief is that there is much more evidence in favor of Google's divinity than there is for the divinity of other more traditional gods, according to them. The arguments for this belief they found in the notion that all other supernatural gods are not scientifically provable, therefore Google should rightfully be given the title of "God", as She exhibits many of the characteristics traditionally associated with such Deities in a scientifically provable manner. These and similar arguments have been transformed into proofs<sup>52</sup> of the existence of Google as a God. The characteristics of this religion are:

- transparency in all of its doings( except for the commercial activities, such as selling branded products and similar) ,
- pacifism in a manner of not mocking or attacking the teachings of other religions, instead they plea upon the respect of others,
- ingenuity in writing responses and creating arguments as a weapon against hate mails, skeptic comments, and insults.

Googleism is therefore a religion based on the vast knowledge of Google, thus making a googliest a person who believes google is a god. However, if comparing Googleism

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51 Online dictionary, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/god> , (accessed on 3rd September 2012)

52 Taken from the official website of the church of Google, <http://www.thechurchofgoogle.org/>, (accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 2012)

with Christianity, the The Adam and Eve of google is Larry Page and Sergey Brin, the creators of Google.

In all of the materials and texts when talking about Google, the believers address it as a feminine noun. Even though even according to the founder search engines do not have gender, they are referring to Google as a female in relation to the old pagan religions when all the deities were feminine opposite to Abrahamic religions such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism where the concept of God is purely masculine.

### **Organization:**

The structure of the organization is not publicly shown. The members of the congregation besides the believers are the founder of the church and the ministers.

### **Founder:**

Googlism and the Church of Google were founded by Matt MacPherson, originally from Ontario, also an owner and the CEO of Camino Marketing. The founder himself addresses the problem of the humans as the creators of all religions: "The Christian god, Islamic god and Hindu gods are also manmade concepts. They exist only in the *imagination* of believers. We consider the belief in invisible beings to be much more illogical than the belief in Google (as a God)."<sup>53</sup>

### **Activities:**

Even though googliest officially do not follow any particular ideology, certain social parameters are necessary to be fulfilled in order to be a good believer, such as only using google as a search engine, do not manipulate the results, do not search for malicious content, do not use it for criminal acts such as stealing or sharing copyrighted material, and never use Internet explorer. Concerning particular beliefs and rituals, they believe in the afterlife in a way that if we upload our thoughts and opinions onto the Internet, our knowledge lives on in Google's cache even after our death. Other search engines are considered gods as well, however Google is the most powerful God.

If an internet user wishes to become a google minister he/she must first become a member of the online forum and make some insightful posts, while getting to know the community and eventually one will be granted access to the ministry. Whilst in order

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<sup>53</sup> Ed Stetzer, 2012, *New Research: Nearly Half of Online Users Use Internet for Religion*, <http://www.edstetzer.com/2012/05/new-research-nearly-half-of-on.html>, (accessed 14. September 2012)

to become a googliest it is enough just to use google and become a member of the forum.

When it comes to sacred rituals it is simply using the search engine google, however, one can do more than that if prior to the search he questions himself about his life and what should he do, so that he could follow the path google shows him after the search. Sacred songs have been written about google by the believers, and singing them is also considered as a religious practice and a ritual. Concerning dates that are important for this religion, one is celebrated annually and that is the Google Appreciation Day, an event that officially occurs on the **14<sup>th</sup> of September**, it is significant because “[Google.com](http://Google.com)” was registered on September 14th.

### **The Virtual Church:**

The Church itself is manifested as an online forum. The number of believers practicing religion is measured by the number of registered users on the church's forum. The activity of the members even though daily, using the search engine, lacks forum activity which is why the exact number of believers is impossible to count. Nevertheless, this religion does count or has counted more than 10.000 believers, and is existent for already 6 years (2006-2012).

## Missionary church of Kopimism

### Belief system:

The **Missionary Church of Kopimism**<sup>54</sup> is a congregation of file sharers<sup>55</sup> who believe that copying information is a sacred virtue. The name of the religion comes from *copy me*, whereas a "Kopimist" or "Kopimist intellectual" is a person who has the philosophical belief that all information should be freely distributed and unrestricted, as oppose to the monopolization of knowledge in all its forms, such as copyright, encouraging piracy of all types of media including music, movies, TV shows, and software.

The basic axioms upon which The Church of Kopimism is based are as follows:

1. Copying of information is ethically right.
2. Dissemination of information is ethically right.
3. Copymixing is a sacred kind of copying, more so than the perfect, digital copying, because it expands and enhances the existing wealth of information.
4. Copying or remixing information communicated by another person is seen as an act of respect and a strong expression of acceptance and Kopimistic faith.
5. The internet is holy.
6. Code is law.

### Organization:

The "top management" of the kopimist faith are the founder and the co-founder. Besides them there are numerous "priests". "Priests" are in charge of maintaining the Universal Church of Kopimism website, and advocating kopimist values and doing the ritual of declaring local interaction points where the Holy Kopimi-pyramid will be "I do hereby declare this a local interaction point. Copy and seed."

Believers are called the operators and their primary task is to live according to Kopimist values. Their secondary role is to assist other Kopimists in living according to Kopimist values. Their tertiary job is to actively shape their environment to become

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<sup>54</sup> in Swedish *Missionerande Kopimistsamfundet*.

<sup>55</sup> File sharing is the practice of distributing or providing access to digitally stored information.

more Kopimistic.

### **Founder:**

The founder of kopimism is Isac Gerson, with the title of the “spiritual leader”, whilst Gustav Nipe is a chairman. In 2012 after three attempts they have managed to register kopimism as an official religion recognized by the Swedish Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency ("kammarkollegiet"). Even though it is officially based in Sweden it has many branches in various countries, such as India, U.S. etc.

### **Activities:**

Concerning the sacred rituals of the kopimists they are called “kopyacting” through which the members “worship the value of information by copying it” (George 2012). This kind of act can either happen online or offline, face to face. The keyboard shortcuts for “Copy” and “Paste,” CTRL+C and CTRL+V, respectively, represent sacred symbols of this church. The “Kopimi” logo, a “K” within a pyramid, is a sort of a mark or an approval for the visitor to use the files or content found on that website that they are not copyrighted, by copylefted. Which would mean that the author has granted permission to use his work. Which is one of the reasons why the simple act of copying information is regarded by Kopimists as a sacred and missionary activity.

Kopimism has even held its own first wedding ceremony in Belgrade on April 28th, 2012, between a Romanian woman and an Italian man. The holy ceremony was conducted by a man wearing a Guy Fawkes mask<sup>56</sup> whose voice was distorted by a voice modulator, and Isak Gerson was a witness.

The church said, *"We are very happy today. Love is all about sharing. A married couple share everything with each other. Hopefully, they will copy and remix some DNA-cells and create a new human being. That is the spirit of Kopimism. Feel the love and share that information. Copy all of its holiness."*

One becomes a kopimist if he adopts the axioms of Kopimism, their tenets and commandments.

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<sup>56</sup> The Guy Fawkes mask is a stylised depiction of Guy Fawkes, the best-known member of the Gunpowder Plot, an attempt to blow up the English Palace of Westminster in London in 1605. Today this mask is a symbol of the anonymous movement representing cyber activism and hacking.

**The Virtual Church:**

At present times, Gerson proclaims there are around 3 or more thousand of believers in Kopimism all around the world, and each and every one of them is practicing religious activities of copying and sharing.

Until now, several congregations have been created around the world. The countries that have uploaded the church's website are Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, France, Greece, India, Israel, Italy, Japan, Lithuania, Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovak Republic, Sweden, UK, Ukraine, and USA. Besides country specific websites, and facebook pages linked to them, priests can proclaim sacred sites in the real world as well. These are called interaction points.

Interaction points are sacred sites that should remain free from anti-Kopimist monitoring and actions. The interaction point is identified by a depiction of the Holy Kopimi-pyramid. An operator will place the Kopimi-pyramid and pronounce the phrase, "I do hereby declare this a local interaction point. Copy and seed". Interaction points can be inside or outside any dormitory, dwelling, public space, or private space. The Holy Kopimi-pyramid should always be present in interaction point rooms.

## **The Church of Reality**

### **Belief system:**

The Church of Reality's system of belief revolves around discovering the true meaning of the universe, and understanding our existence and role in it.

The Church of Reality is designed to be a web based religion, whose gospel embraces the latest technology. The founder actually used linux operating system as a role model, for the creation of the church:" Linux was uploaded onto a server and other programmers around the world became interested in it and started developing a community around the Linux project. That community of developers is in the hundreds of thousands and now there are over 100,000 free software projects that have formed communities around their software most of which runs with Linux. And now every person who uses any computer anywhere is probably using many programs that came from these communities. The Internet, which we refer to as the Sacred Router, was created from a software community of people working together over the internet with no central location. The Church of Reality is designed to develop in the same structure model as Linux."

The notion of undermining religion has also been addressed in their texts, since one of their goals is to expose religion to the light of reality and challenge belief systems on the basis of what's real. Through this approach they believe that people start to think about religions, re-question it and thus help religions evolve in better versions that will in fact improve their religious experience.

The Church of Reality represents a community project, location independent that summons its believers on the notion of re-examining the reality and be skeptic towards the world and knowledge. Their so called political goal is to by reality more important in people's lives elect political leaders who are well grounded in reality. These would preferably for them be the people who consider reality in making the decisions for the people. They also promote the existence and participation of smart people, stating that the world would be better off if smart people were in charge. Which is why their "secret agenda" is trying to get smart people elected to office who believe in reality and will teach Realism in the public schools. Whether or not this is just futuristic opinion and to enthusiastic or unreal, their teachings do promote and speak about contemporary issues.



**Organization and the Founder:**

The founder of the Church Mark Perkell regards himself as the project manager developing a public domain religion. The rest of the administrative structure of the church consists of the Council of realists, where besides Mark, Robin Gross and Deborah Pierce. Beside the council there are technical stuff, editorial stuff, the monks of the order of the Root (highly committed members that maintain the project and have the power and authority to fulfill missions), The beacons who represent the clergy and of course the members/believers.

Becoming a member of the church is a simple registration on the online forum, and subscribing to the mailing list. Members or non-members can give money donations for the church's better functioning and improving. It is also a benefit to the believers if they wish to buy branded products of the Church of Reality.

**Activities:**

The activities that the believers can partake as stated by the Church are: Spread the Word; Link to US; suggesting new ideas; IRS Church Status; buying the church's merchandise; giving charity to the church; starting missionary projects; advertising and promoting the church; creating symbols and artwork for the church; writing and composing hymns; becoming a member by registering on the official forum; and of course the most crucial one being sceptic towards the world; and re-questioning the reality.

**The Virtual Church:**

The church has in 2005 gotten the IRS<sup>57</sup> tax exempt status thus becoming an official private foundation or charity institution recognized by United States legislative. The church is manifested in a website with an online forum. The forum has approximately eight hundred active believers, whilst the number of passive ones is around three thousand. Besides the online church, they promote the religious congregation of the Unitarian universalist that has compatible values and therefore they recommend to their believers if they wish the sensation of going to the physical church this would be the right choice for them.

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<sup>57</sup> The IRS is the U.S. government agency responsible for tax collection and tax law enforcement. Definition taken from the official website of the IRS accessed on the 14<sup>th</sup> of September 2012. ([www.irs.gov](http://www.irs.gov))

The comparative table of the three presented case studies:

	<b>Kopimism</b>	<b>The Church of Google</b>	<b>The Church of Reality</b>
<b>Tenet<sup>58</sup>:</b>	Copy. download, upload!	Google search!	If its real we believe in it!
<b>Commandments</b>	4 main commandments <sup>59</sup>	11 commandments <sup>60</sup>	Sacred principles
<b>Rituals</b>	Ctrl +C, Ctrl +V	Google search	Writing code
<b>Symbols</b>	Kopimi symbol	Church's logo	Church's logo
<b>Founder</b>	<i>Isak Gerson</i>	Matt MacPherson	Marc Perkel
<b>No of believers</b>	around 3000	around 12.220	748active <sup>61</sup>
<b>Year founded</b>	2012	2006	1998
<b>Website</b>	yes <sup>62</sup>	yes <sup>63</sup>	yes <sup>64</sup>
<b>Forum</b>	No	Yes	yes

58 ten-et- any opinion, principle, doctrine, dogma, etc., especially one held as true by members of a profession, group, or movement., <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/tenet>, (accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> August, 2012)

59 All knowledge to all

The search for knowledge is sacred

The circulation of knowledge is sacred

The act of copying is sacred.

60 Thou shalt have no other Search Engine before me, neither Yahoo nor Lycos, AltaVista nor Metacrawler.

Thou shalt worship only me, and come to Google only for answers.

Thou shalt not build thy own commercial-free Search Engine, for I am a jealous Engine, bringing law suits and plagues against the fathers of the children unto the third and fourth generations.

Thou shalt not use Google as a verb to mean the use of any lesser Search Engine.

Thou shalt remember each passing day and use thy time as an opportunity to gain knowledge of the unknown.

Thou shalt honor thy fellow humans, regardless of gender, sexual orientation or race, for each has invaluable experience and knowledge to contribute toward humankind.

Thou shalt not misspell whilst praying to me.

Thou shalt not hotlink.

Thou shalt not plagiarise or take undue credit for other's work.

Thou shalt not use reciprocal links nor link farms, for I am a vengeful but fair engine and will diminish thy PageRank. The Google Dance shall cometh.

Thou shalt not manipulate Search Results. Search Engine Optimization is but the work of Microsoft.

61 Besides the active members there are a couple of thousand non-active believers, for whom it is unknown have they either transferred to another religion, or were just curious fake members wanting to try out something new, or explore.

62 The Missionary Church of Kopimism – official webpage, <http://kopimistsamfundet.se/english/> (accessed on August, 2012)

63 The Church of Google - official webpage., <http://www.thechurchofgoogle.org/> , (accessed on August, 2012)

64 The Church of Reality - official webpage., <http://www.churchofreality.org/> , (accessed on August, 2012)

## **Political, social and cultural background**

What is, if any, the social, cultural and political engagement behind (in focus of) the internet based religions? This was one of the questions asked in the beginning of the thesis. These three case studies will now be analyzed from the political, social and cultural aspect. Afterwards this question will be addressed again in the next chapter.

What makes the analyses of these three churches interesting besides the belief that technology, or internet, or a search engine is divine, is their opinion on copyright. A political approach to the analyses of these three churches is necessary since, their opposing attitude towards author's right. For example, Kopimism is established in Sweden under European legislative. Whilst The Church of Google and the Church of Reality are both established in America and believe one should respect author's rights, considering sharing of information and other's people work, without their consent, stealing.

Political and economical background is more than transparent for the Kopimism and Google Church. Most of the Kopimist church believers are also members or supporters of the Pirate party, so is the founder. Whilst the founder of the Church of Google is a marketing expert owning his own advertising agency, and the founder of The Church of reality is a computer expert.

The professional occupations of the founders correlate with the concept of the rituals and tenets of the churches. Moreover, Isac Gerson as a hacker, computer expert, and a cyber activist, more precisely a former Pirate bay believer, promotes file sharing, Matt MacPherson, as a marketing expert, promotes using only one brand of a browser or a search engine, and that is Google, or Google Chrome, believing only this particular brand is of divine nature, also promoting respect of the copyright and forbidding illegal file sharing. Mark Perkel on the other hand, also a computer expert, and somewhat of a philosopher, promotes believing in the code, and the computer languages, promoting helping amongst people through technology and examining everything around us constantly. This skepticism of the world around us is manifested through numerous texts available at the church's website, all philosophical and polemical in nature.

Another interesting distinction that arouse from what we could only guess the reason

is, is in fact the media popularity and presence of these religions. Kopimism is the most exploited in the media of the three, especially after the official recognition of the Church in Sweden in January 2012. This may be the reason for such huge publicity difference between these.

Nevertheless, all of the three churches have to deal with numerous negative comments and attacks towards them from the public. Which is why both Church of Reality and The Church of Google on their websites have answers or comments to the hate mail they receive daily. Whilst such a thing is not necessary for the Kopimist church since, numerous interviews in global media such as the New York Times and similar are available online, probably due to it being the only officially recognized by the legislature.

Existence of these new religious movements, such as previously compared case studies, may imply that anything in our society that instills ultimate meaning could be religious, as long as it displays the criteria that were mentioned earlier: strong beliefs and references to objects or ideas that are placed above ordinary human experience (Karen Parna, 1977). People's exhilaration about wonders like the Internet are according to Parna important to meaning-making in contemporary, secular culture, because they fulfill functions that belonged to the domain of religious institutions in earlier times, providing us with beliefs and offering us solace and security. We can observe religion through Durkheim's (Durkheim 1952: 249-251; 1964: 5) line of reasoning in his writings on social unease, certainty about how the world 'works', where it is headed and what its norms are. If so, the religion offered the society a sense of clarity and certainty about the meaning of the world around us. The internet, as well, offers people that kind of security. *Moreover, it articulates fears, fascinations and aspirations with suitable emotion and devotion, and it offers us storylines, symbols and imagery that can reflect the true significance of the things we deem important* (Parna, 1977).

The use of traditional elements in previously mentioned internet based religions offers to the society a possibility to be both sacral and secular. How can this be the case and is it will be addressed amongst other issues in the following discussion.

## Discussion:

Consists of methodologically conducted structured interviews with the leading experts addressing the discourse of online religions and religion online or the network society. The experts that have been interviewed are as following:

- Marcus Davidsen - a PhD candidate of Heidelberg university, with an MA thesis in *Religion and Internet*, now he addresses the question of Fictional Religions: The Morphology and Reception of Invented Religions embedded in Works of Fiction.
- Heidi Campbell – has been researching religion and the internet and what impact new media technologies are having on religious communities, since 1997. She has written on a variety of topics including religion online, new media ethics, technology and theology and religious community's response to mass media.
- Jolyon Mitchell – is a professor of Communications, Arts and Religion relevant for his research of *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*.
- Carole Cusack – professor of Religion with a research interest in the Contemporary Religious Trends.
- Chris Helland - is an expert in online religious activity and religion and Internet research. He studies religion in contemporary culture from a sociological perspective. His primary work examines the impact of the Internet and World Wide Web on a variety of religious traditions.
- Lynn Clark – a professor of Communication currently involved in a project called Popular Culture in a Religiously and Culturally Plural World, with a research interest in media and religion.
- Paul Emerson Teusner – a professor, that researches how young people use digital devices and social software to construct social, gender, religious and cultural identities. This involves questions regarding how networked

individualism is changing religion in the public sphere; how public chatter/the changing private-public divide is shaping social identities; how mobile devices change the aesthetic experience of and interaction with religious text, and.

**Issue no1: Are internet based religions religions (per se)?** If we consider religions as *a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs*<sup>65</sup>.

Hyper real religions, parody religions, fake religions – these are the usual terms for describing internet based religions. Carole Cusack in her book on Invented Religions states: **“This is a fiction so good it should be true...”**. It is obvious that a proper categorization is necessary. However, since there are a lot of new religious movements on the web, and new ones are emerging daily it is almost impossible to be aware of each one. When asked this question Carole referred to more popular and older religions than for example Kopimism.

**Carole Cusack:** *This question is difficult to answer. The first issue is what you think an 'internet-based religion' is. Some religions, like Jediism, are primarily online, but there are real-world ('meat world') Jedi Knights and Jedi Temples exist in the UK and the US. So Jediism is not entirely an internet-based religion. Discordianism began in the real world, and migrated online when the internet emerged from its military beginnings and became a site of geek subculture. When the World Wide Web (with graphic interface) was invented in 1989 it became possible for people who were not IT specialists to contribute to internet based religions. The internet is vitally important because it enables people in different geographical locations to share ideas and form communities. Some internet based religions are real religions, clearly. But ultimately that is a question about peoples' intentions (if they are not serious, then they are not serious. But if they are serious, then they are really religious).*

If we re-examine the intentions that Carol mentions we can divide two types of online religions: parody religions and real online religions so to speak. Whereas the reason for creation differs. In parody religions their purpose is to target certain aspects,

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<sup>65</sup> Definition taken from the Online etymology dictionary, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/religion>, (accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> of September 2012)

elements or dogmas in a particular religion, through including legitimate religious elements, so that the society would recognize it. The users or so to say “believers” of parody religions would therefore include nonreligious, irreligious or “indifferent” people who have not found the official religion(s) to attend to their needs in interpreting life and the world (Essi Makela, 2012). In “real” online religions, internet based religions, also considered as “alternative” religions, if the users/believers practice devotions and the dogma does interpret their needs, even though for some it could also be considered parody or joke religion, it is as real as a religion can get. “Even if it begins as a joke, the more a joke is told and applied to incidents in real life, the closer you may come to accepting the narrative as true.”(Carole Cusack, 2012).

***Chriss Helland:** This is a difficult question because there are very few actual Internet based religious groups. I think groups that heavily rely upon the Internet to maintain their identity, beliefs, social structure (etc.) are just as real as groups that use other forms of media to do those same things. However, face to face is also a very important component of religion (especially from the sociological standpoint) and Internet based religions may not provide this. What could be a very authentic aspect of Internet based religious activity is that it acts as a supplement to peoples' religious beliefs and practices--or spirituality.*

Not having the traditional medium of an institution such as the church or a temple of worship, and a possibility of a face to face confessions, or similar does make one of the crucial differences between online based religions and religions online. Even though, some of the internet based religions consist of no more than a few texts on the web, the act of believing and practicing it through building new narratives and regarding it as a literal truths in their everyday lives does make it a spiritual community that individuals do practice.

***Markus Davidsen:** I consider religions to be activity directed at or presupposing culturally postulated superhuman agents. Whether such activity takes place online or offline is no matter, just as one can have religion but within and without institutions and traditions.*

***Lynn Clark:** I consider them religions to the extent that their participants consider them religions.*

**Paul Emerson Teusner:** *Of course, if you consider how we define religion. Gordon Lynch has a great article on how sociologists are coming to terms with defining religion as new practices and beliefs surface. His basic argument is that functionalist definitions have been beaten by poststructuralism of late.*

David Chidester (2005) introduces the term "authentic fakes" as a description for religious behavior which draws its inspiration from popular culture and which may be authentic religious behavior but isn't "really" religious in the traditional sense. He takes Discordianism as an example of orchestrated fake religion which might be regarded as authentic religious experiences. These religions represent how the facets of popular culture can metamorphose into belief systems with their own rituals and structures, thus becoming a legitimate religion in regards to the definition of religion as a belief system.

**Issue no2: Does the existence of internet based religion respond to the consumer's need for socialization and belonging to the community?**

The newly created consumer's need and the need to answer to those needs, is rooted in the entire existence of computers and internet. As we previously mentioned the internet itself even though was created for other purposes, immediately became a way of connecting individuals, and groups. The characteristic of internet as a medium, and as a fragmented and deterritorialized space does relate to the need of finding the community with specific beliefs and characteristics. Before the globalization not all people were able to find their counterparts.

**Carole Cusack:** *All human beings have a need for community. Nowadays that need might be served in lots of different ways. In the pre-modern world everyone was a member of a small community (village, town) and there was not a lot of opportunity to belong to anything different. Similarly there was not a lot of consumerism in that historical period. In the modern era, people have changed. They can belong to elective communities, and there are many things to consume (experiences, clothes, travel, cultures, different religions, etc). Internet based religion is just one of millions of options.*

As Carole states, the internet itself offers numerous options and corresponds to a variety of needs. Jolyon Mitchell and Lynn Clark both agree with the premise that internet based religions do respond to the consumer's need. However, the issue can



also be regarded in relation to was the need created by the religions, or recognized and then answered.

**Chriss Helland:** *When we talk about the West we are talking about a wired world. Many people now maintain their identities (and their sense of community) through online activity. I think a lot of religious groups recognize this and have developed their online presence and online social networks to tap into this. This is a complicated issue. In some ways its a chicken and the egg question--which came first? Did the religious groups go online to try and create communities for their followers in the new network or did people go online and then bring their social world and social activity into that environment. I think it is a lot of both things happening.*

However, how much of these needs and feelings of belonging is answered through internet, and compared in quality is it less valuable and weak compared to the offline communities and face to face interaction. Davidsen argues that this actually is the case.

**Markus Davidsen:** *Internet is fascilitating people who share certain interests and ideas to come together and form communités, also groups that would not have been able to find each other before the internet. On the other hand, internet communities, even the strongest ones, do not seem to give people the same safe and taken-for-granted sense of community as offline communities do.*

However, how much can an offline local community offer to an individual, since not all are the same, in fact it is closer to truth that all of us are so different, and nourish different needs. Paul Emerson confirms that.

**Paul Emerson Teusner:** *I think the Internet has fuelled a network sociability that has been growing in late modernity. Traditional religions have operated on the basis that the local community (e.g. congregation, Mass, mosque, etc.) offers everything an individual needs for religious growth. It's arguable that this has never been true, but of late individuals have had a growing market of resources for religious growth.*

All of the interviewed theoreticians agree that internet based religions do respond to the consumer's need for belonging and socialization. However the level of fullfilment is arguable.

**Issue no3: What is, if any, the social, cultural and political engagement behind (in focus of) the internet based religions?**

The process of mediatization itself affects the social, political and cultural sphere. This would imply that all mediatized religions affect in the same or similar way, simply by operating in that environment. Even though certain internet based religions oppose the notion that they have political pretensions it is unavoidable due to the nature of the medium today, Web 2.0, and the ability to even as an end user take action and make impact on the product. Nonetheless, certain internet based religions explicitly state their political, social and cultural engagements.

All of the interviewed experts argue that it depends on what kind of internet based religion it is, what are its postulates and whether or not its engagement is solely internet based or refer to offline activities as well.

**Chriss Helland:** *Depends on the group. My current research is looking at Tibetan Buddhism online and the role the Internet now plays in maintaining a Tibetan national identity. Different groups will have different focuses and then that will attract people that resonate with those focuses and actions. Some of the groups would have even been created by people that were especially motivated about certain issues--and maybe they found that focus and engagement lacking in their "off-line" religious group.*

Of course the prime example here would be the difference between Kopimism and The Church of Google. Their political standpoint are completely different. Whilst Kopimism promotes, as a devotional activity even, sharing information and content, The Church of Google promotes respecting author's rights, and copyright, promoting that a good believer will pay for using the content, and that will not download illegally.

**Paul Emerson Teusner:** *There are always social, cultural and political motivations behind the rise of any new religious movement, but not just one.*

Nevertheless, if a certain political standpoint is obvious and even present in the dogma of the religion, it is still arguable what other political social or cultural pretensions does that particular religion have. It was not a lonely case in history of religious community abusing its power.

**Issue no4: What are the expectations of believers of internet based religions, and is there a distinction between these expectations and those from other traditional religions?**

The notion of the belonging to a particular community that one relates to the best, followed with spiritual fulfillment and a creationism theory that is in best accordance with the believers personal opinion in itself differs from one religion to another, but in its core the expectations are directly related to the belief system of specific religions, and whence the comparison is possible but not relevant.

**Jolyon Mitchell:** *Not sure we can talk about 'internet based religions' and 'other traditional religions' - many traditional religions embrace new media.*

**Carole Cusack:** *The privileging of belief is a mistake based on the idea that Protestant Christianity is normative. Many religions don't think belief is important at all, but rather privilege ritual, dietary observance etc. Thus it is not important whether people who are members of internet-based religions have different expectations to people who are members of Pentecostal churches, mosques, synagogues etc.*

**Paul Emerson Teusner:** I don't think you can argue for any expectations per se, and that each religion satisfies a different expectation. By and large, however, I would posit that Internet religions recognize that they can only be resources for individuals who find themselves in changing contexts daily, and can do little to provide ongoing communal living.

**Issue no5: Do you consider Internet more of a stimulator or facilitator for the creation of new religions?**

Most of the theoreticians would agree that it can do both, however are there small but noticeable distinctions between these two terms, facilitator, and stimulator. As a facilitator internet would merely serve as a channel through which new religions would approach or gather its believers. Whilst as a stimulator it would inspire the birth of new religions by encouraging individuals or groups to gather in communities that share similar beliefs. However how new are the new religions?

**Carole Cusack:** *New religions are neither really new or interesting; there have been new religions since the dawn of time (humans are always developing new ideas and resisting against established orthodoxies). New religions are different*

*to internet-based religions (which might be classified as 'new new religions' in Gordon Melton's terms [2007], following the Japanese shin shin shukyo).*

Certain religions would be classified as “new new religions” according to Gordon Melton (2007), and perfect examples of it would be internet based religion that believe in internet itself as a deity, even though some theoreticians deny their legitimacy.

**Markus Davidsen:** *Mostly a facilitator, making communication between people and the exchange of information, easier. The fact that it can be difficult to stay private on the net can be a hindrance though?. In the 1990s, when internet was new, people thought that internet-centred religions that considered the internet itself to be divine or something like that would develop, but internet has become too everyday a tool for such fascinations to be attributed to it.*

Concerning others such as fiction based online religion they do correspond to the Hellands view on internet as a facilitator.

**Chriss Helland:** *Its a great tool for communicating and networking--so I think it provides a lot of opportunity for people to get their message out. How the message is received is anyone's guess. The potential is there--but that potential exists in the off-line world also...*

#### **Issue no6: Is the new media devolving or evolving religion?**

The internet has proven to be thus far a double edged sword for religion. Closely tied to media literacy much of the use of internet as a sacred space have been both fruitful but also devastating for religious use. One must follow the tides of time. The development of society, new available knowledge and new communication and work processes evoke religion for example to change and evolve. However is that road to evolution regressive or progressive.

**Carole Cusack:** *All new religion is devolutionary; people are more individualistic and less interested in adhering to established rules and institutions. Of course, that then means that religion is evolving. But that's normal. Christianity now has evolved from what was happening in the first century AD.*

Some argue that it does not evolve or devolve it just changes. The change is expected and therefor is necessary.

**Markus Davidsen:** *I don't think that religion devolves or evolves. But it does change and new media contribute to this.*

Most of the interviewed experts however pointed out that religion is actually evolving. Evangelism has to follow the need of the users believers, and most of the newly formed religions are created in the new media environment that has open access to information and knowledge that was once not so openly available. Which implies that almost everybody with an internet connection can browse through numerous religions, and if media literate make conclusions concerning the significance and modernization of fulfilling needs relates to which religion.

**Chriss Helland:** *Evolving, evolving, evolving! There is some interesting work done on ritual and the Internet that I think supports this belief.*

**Lynn Clark:** *I don't think it's possible for religion to "devolve," as religion is a human phenomenon that changes as humans change. And I don't believe that it is worthwhile to think of humanity as "devolving."*

**Paul Emerson Teusner:** *New media are evolving religion. A survey of religious community apps for mobile phones, like iPhones, show a willingness to reach out to people through new technologies.*

#### **Issue no7: Is new media contributing to secularization or re-sacralization?**

After the fall of certain communist regimes the religion in some countries has flourished (Romania for example), in some countries religion was always strong no matter the technological and scientific breakthroughs (such as Latin America) and at some countries the religion has evolved and fragmented according to the needs of the believers (e.g. America). Even so, globally one can notice the ever increased presence of religious themes in the media. This can be attributed to the evangelists of different media that fully recognized the potential of the mediatization and are using it in their benefit of attracting more believers. At first glance the new media through the development of science and technology is contributing to the secularization of modern society. Subsequently, we may interpret the development as an increased tendency towards a re-sacralization of modern society (Demerath, 2003) in which secular tendencies are gradually being replaced or at least challenged by the resurgence of Christianity, Islam and newer forms of religion. (Hjarvard, 2006)

Chriss Helland believes that actually both processes are happening simultaneously. Lynn Clark confirms this through the example of Kopimism and The Church of Google that are internet centered religions, believing that internet is a deity actually have elements of both secularization and re-sacralization. Whilst Joylon Mitchell also believes it can go both ways, but separates the two processes arguing that there are many audiences who use new media and religion in many different ways.

Cusack points out that the birth and acknowledgment of new religions actually brings forth the secularization:

**Carole Cusack:** *Technology may be used as a medium of sacralisation if people want to conduct their spiritual or religious lives online. It's important to realise that it is the secular climate that makes the multi-faith society we are familiar with possible (because it de-privileged Christianity and let people know that all religions were equally legitimate).*

Which is why if we consider a longer period of time, secularization of society becomes more visible than re-sacralization. The root of this process is situated in the fact that the media has taken over many of the social functions, that used to be performed by the religious institutions. Rituals, worship, mourning, celebration are all social activities that earlier on relied on institutionalized religion, but have now been taken over by the media and transformed into more or less secular activities (Martin-Barbero, 1997).

In spite of this if we observe religion interconnecting with media it provides evidence to both tendencies of secularization and re-sacralization.

**Paul Emerson Teusner:** *New media offers re-sacralisation in the same sense that all audio-visual media (e.g. TV) and consumer culture in general has provided. For examples, rituals that evolved around sporting events, made specifically for television audiences, have brought a sacralization to these events.*

**Issue no8: How or to which extent has the development of technology and new media influence the development of new socio-cultural needs?**

This question can actually be observed vice versa. How has society and its socio-cultural needs affect the development of technology. And this is precisely what Cusack and Davidsen argue: technology itself did not create new socio-cultural needs, but only

allowed them to manifest and develop.

**Carole Cusack:** *I think that the problem with this question is that we know that there were people throughout history who thought that they wanted to drink human blood, or that they were partly animal in spirit, or that they were somehow 'different' to other people. But now there is the internet, so these people are able to get in touch with others and you get groups like the Otherkin ([www.otherkin.net](http://www.otherkin.net) <<http://www.otherkin.net>>) and there are groups of 'real' vampires ([www.sanguinarius.org](http://www.sanguinarius.org) <<http://www.sanguinarius.org>>). These people aren't expressing new needs, but they are able to implement their needs in different ways. Some people who in the past would have repressed and denied their desires and needs can now easily express them and share them with their friends online. They can also meet in the real world if they wish (like Furries, a sub-community of Therianthropy, who meet and wear fur suits and often engage in sexual fetishism). Therianthropy, Otherkin and so on count as spiritualities (though perhaps not religions) because they are identity-conferring practices and beliefs that help these people get in touch with their 'true selves'.*

If we presume that technology and the sociocultural need are growing intertwined it could mean we can not separate the two. However it could also be possible that technology only upgrades and not creates new socio-cultural needs.

**Paul Emerson Teusner:** *I think new technologies do well to add to people's general social mobility, that the Internet is no longer something that we "go to", but something that is on the periphery of all of our social interactions. Thus our connections to people are constantly available, and we are able to stay connected to different networks at any point in time.*

However, if we observe some of the "new" needs of the society, a question of were all needs pre-existent, and if not are all needs justified, or are some just becoming almost like l'art pour l'art, a need for a need.

**Chriss Helland:** *Consumer culture is crazy. I think that if you look at something like the smart-phones and the iphone you can see that technological "needs" keep feeding themselves and then they create all sorts of other "needs". Don't get me wrong--I have an iphone and its amazing--but then this leads to the "need" for the apps, other gadgets, then there will be a new iphone, etc.*

## Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to identify and describe phenomena of internet based religions, the surroundings and influences that have led to its establishment, as well as present rituals, symbols and dogma behind this newly formed religion. However, due to the dynamic of changes in this multidisciplinary environment it was necessary to exit the framework of only internet based religions and address the broader issues of the sociology of the internet, modernized network society, and traditional religions and new religious movements operating online. This wider focus was supposed to offer answers to where the need for creation of internet based religions was started, under what influences and what context is it growing, and how the society can perceive it and why.

In almost all religions whose work is based online, whether it be online religions (*that import traditional forms of religion online*) or religions online (*adapt religion to creating new forms of networked spiritual interactions*), we can clearly see the attempt to recreate or stimulate real space in virtual space, some being more embracing and aware of the full potential of the virtual space than others.

One of the products of the research work was the mapping of internet based religions, and other fiction or parody religions based primarily online. After which a comparative analysis of three of the chosen internet based religions whose system belief is of internet itself being of divine nature. In the end answers to research questions that directly explain and frame the phenomena of internet based religions are offered in a manner of structured interviews with the experts from the field.

Research questions and possible answers:

*How has the development of technology and new media influenced the development of new socio-cultural needs?* Answer to this question lies in observing the question vice versa. How has society and its socio-cultural needs affect the development of technology. Technology itself did not create new socio-cultural needs, but only allowed them to manifest and develop. These new socio-cultural needs are various. Some may include the need to be more actively involved in the religious community



than just a passive listener of a sermon. Others can be the selection of the community itself, for instance, a religious group believing in the existence of vampires, cannibals, aliens, or The Matrix.

*Do internet based religions integrate traditional rituals and dogma redefining and adjusting them to the new media surrounding and active audience?* Yes, every religion mentioned in this thesis has in some way used traditional religion as an inspiration. For example, the three case studies (The Church of Google, The Missionary Church of Kopimism, and The Church of Reality) that have been analyzed use the term Church in order to enter the known christian discourse. They all believe in the christian definition of God, as defined by the the Being perfect in power, wisdom, and goodness who is worshiped as creator and ruler of the universe<sup>66</sup>, in their case the Internet. Furthermore, they all have elements of traditional religions such as: rituals; sermons; commemorations; sacrifices; festivals; feasts; trance; initiations; funerary services; matrimonial services; meditation; prayer; music; art; dance; public service or other aspects of human culture.

*Does the existence of internet based religion respond to the consumer's need for socialization and belonging to the community?* Yes. Since, the characteristic of internet as a medium, and as a fragmented and deterritorialized space does relate to the need of finding the community with specific beliefs and characteristics. Surpassing the traditional boundary of having to be in the same space or in the same time.

*What is, if any, the social, cultural and political engagement behind (in focus of) the internet based religions?* Comparative analysis of the three case study religions, Kopimist Church, The Church of Google and The Church of Reality has showed the significance of these three factors. The Social, cultural and political engagement is noted at all three religions, being not just a subversive notion but a ritual, or a sacred thought. Also, the political belief of the founder is crucial for the religion itself. The importance of this question can be seen in the ever more trending dilemma of spreading of information and author's rights, followed by the attempt of the world governments to try to control the internet and the content, with possible charging of certain uses.

*Are internet based religions religions (per se)?* If we consider religions as a set of

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66 Online dictionary, accessed in September 2012 (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/god> )

beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs. Even though many theoreticians argue the acceptance of certain internet based religions as true genuine religious movements, it is undeniable that they do have all characteristics of the traditional religions, and that some should be regarded differently and more significantly than others. Durkheim's thesis that religion is likely to transform parallel to changes in societies (Durkheim 2001: 326). In different passages of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* he argues that religion responds to the specific social, intellectual and material conditions of a community and he makes the point that therefore no manifestation of religion should be seen as fake or false (Durkheim 2001: 4). The authenticity of certain religious movements such as Kopimism is different than a joke or parody religion believing in a comic book creator. However, it is up to the believers to decide on the genuine authenticity of these religions, and then to the critics to either accept that or continue examining and denying it. Carole Cusack's quote explains this notion: "if they are not serious, then they are not serious. But if they are serious, then they are really religious."

Existence of these new religious movements, such as previously compared case studies, may imply that anything in our society that instills ultimate meaning could be religious, as long as it displays the criteria that were mentioned earlier: strong beliefs and references to objects or ideas that are placed above ordinary human experience (Karen Parna, 1977).

*Is Internet more of a stimulator or facilitator for the creation of new religions?* Internet is actually both of a simulator and facilitator, and for some religions the divinity itself. It is both the sacred space and the sacred.

*Is the new media devolving or evolving religion?* If we accept the notion that religion today is definitely changed and is changing continuously, is that change positive or negative. Is it progressing to a more advanced form of religion or is it negatively changing the pre-established rules and institutions. Majority of experts believe in duality of this, arguing that it is actually doing both. For instance, religious community apps for mobile phones, like iPhones, show a willingness to reach out to people through new technologies, as pointed out by Prof Tesner. Furthermore, we can consider that all new religion is devolutionary; people are more individualistic and less

interested in adhering to established rules and institutions(Cusack, 2012). Of course, this implies that religion is evolving. Which is why it must be agreeable that the new media are definitely changing religion by making it adapt to the previously explained consumer's needs. Whether or not this change is negative or positive is solely up to the individuals opinion.

*Is new media contributing to secularization or re-sacralization?* Using technology as a medium for spiritual fulfillment and development of the people contributes to re-sacralization. If we consider re-sacralization as the return of religious meanings to public sectors of social life such as politics, the arts, and the body, and the resistance of secularization( as the removal of religious meanings from public life). Nonetheless, the society in which this is possible and acceptable lives in a secular climate which is why both of the processes are happening simultaneously, no matter how contradictory it sounds. Lynn Clark confirms this through the example of Kopimism and The Church of Google that are internet centered religions, believing that internet is a deity actually have elements of both secularization and re-sacralization.

*What are the expectations of believers of internet based religions, and is there a distinction between these expectations and those from other traditional religions?* The notion of the belonging to a particular community that one best relates to, followed with spiritual fulfillment and a creationism theory that is in best accordance with the believers personal opinion in itself differs from one religion to another, but in its core the expectations are directly related to the belief system of specific religions, and whence the comparison is possible but not relevant.

As concerns the research's hypothesis, all of them have been confirmed, some more than others. The new media landscape together with philosophy of interconnected society is acting as a stimulus and precondition for the foundation of new models of religious communities. Moreover, even though the emerging of the new media has not developed completely new socio-cultural needs, but has just awoken their manifestations, it is encouraging the consumers to take a more active role in all everyday rituals, changing consumers into creators. Thus, internet based religions encourage the development of new community models, in this way contributing to a more pluralistic and diverse society, through redefinition of traditional dogma's and rituals adjusting to new types of communication and behavior of the modern society.

## Appendix

### The Church of Google

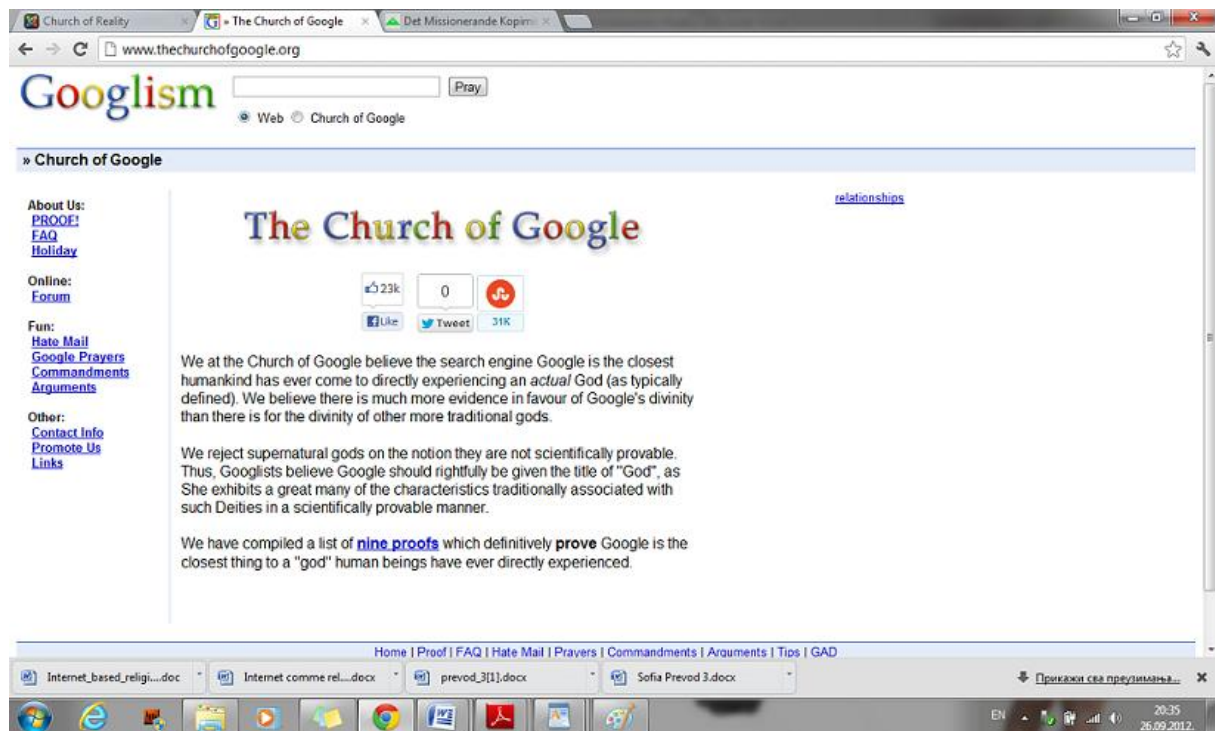


Figure 1 The Church of Google – homepage



Figure 2 The Church of Google - Certificate of becoming a Minister version 1





Figure 3 The Church of Google - Certificate of becoming a Minister version 2



Figure 4 The Church of Google - examples of church's promotion material - avatars and banners

## The Missionary church of Kopimism

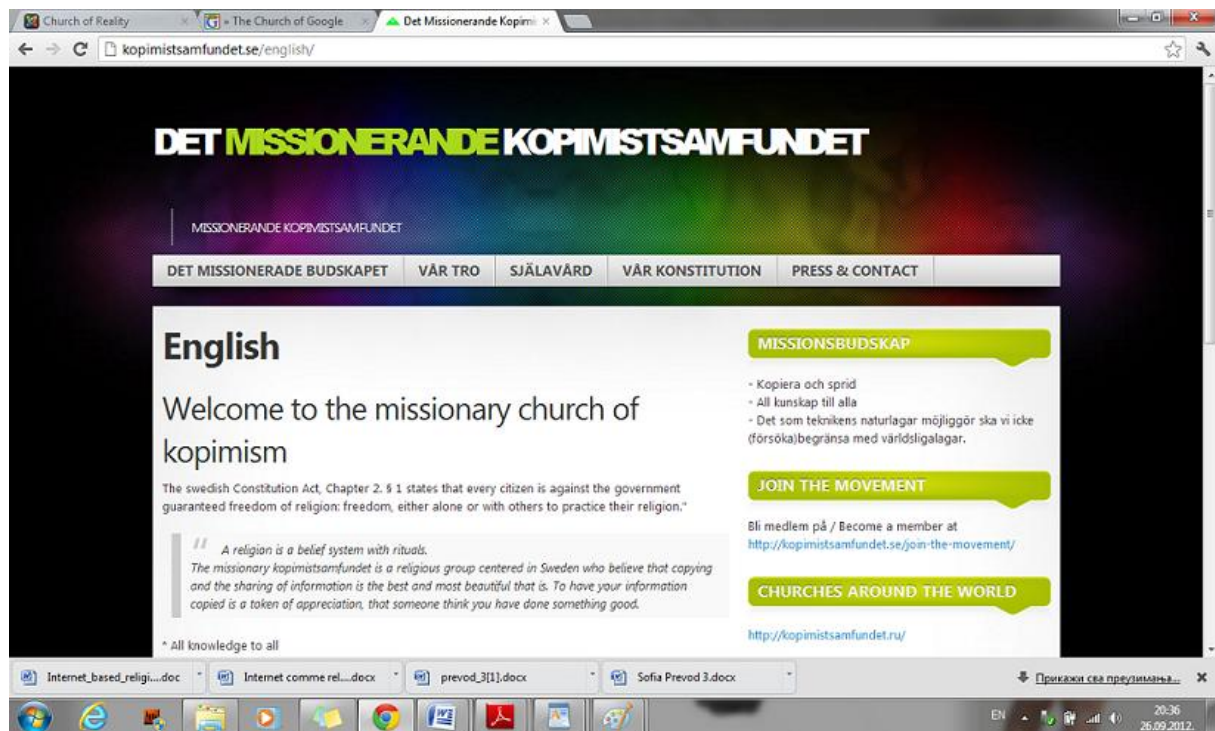


Figure 5 The missionary church of kopimism – Homepage

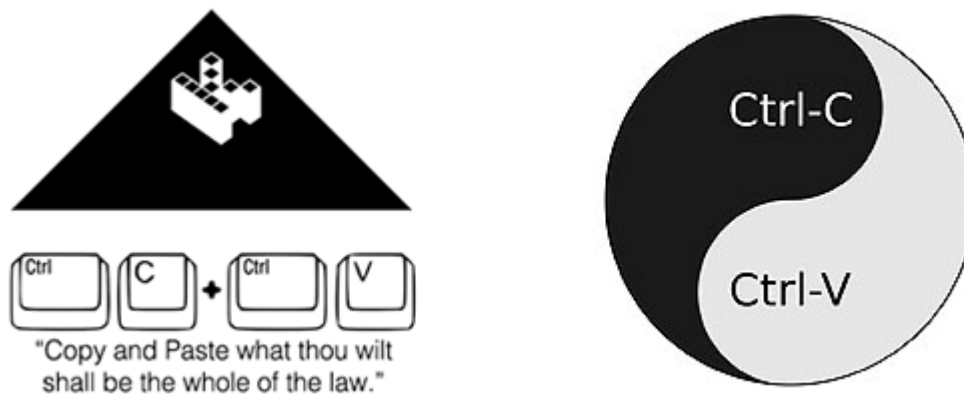
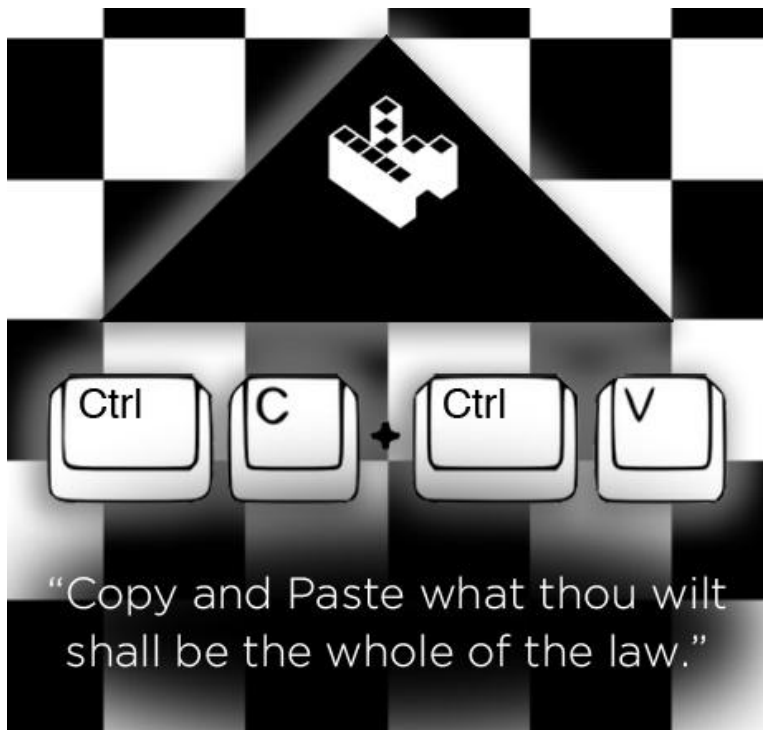


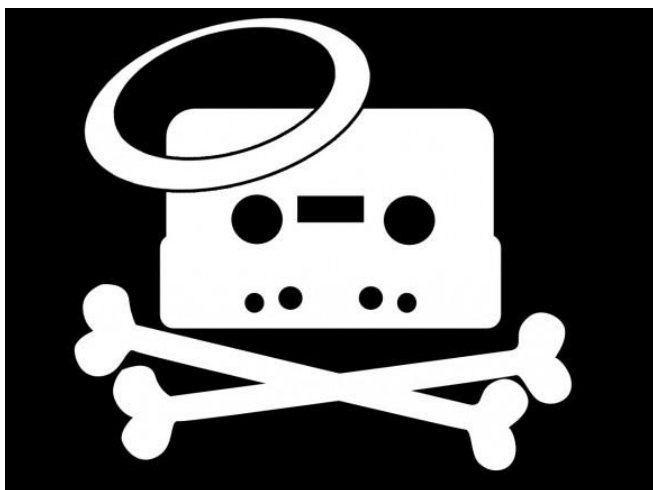
Figure 6 Kopimism symbols



*Figure 7 The missionary church of kopimism in New Zealand*



*Figure 8 Kopimism promo image*



*Figure 9Kopimism - symbol of a pirate religion*



*Figure 10The missionary church of kopimism in Israel*



*Figure 11Kopimism symbol - LGBT friendly*





*Figure 12 The first kopimist wedding held in Belgrade – picture 1*



*Figure 13 The first kopimist wedding held in Belgrade – picture 2*



Figure 14Kopimism poster - fan made



## The Church of Reality



Figure 15 The Church of Reality – Homepage

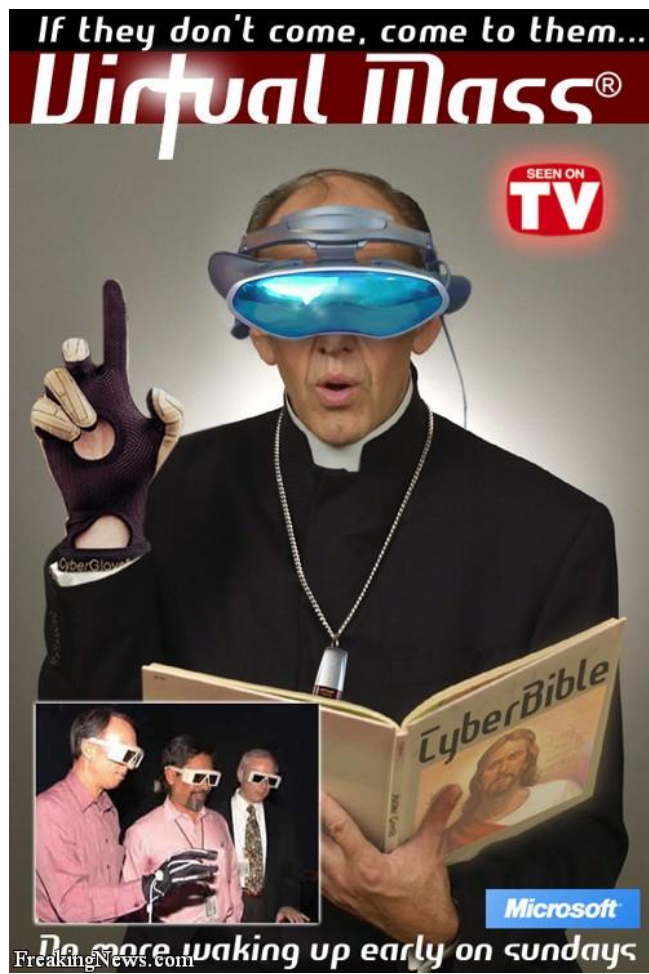


Figure 16 The Church of Reality - bumper sticker



Figure 17 The Church of Reality – Logo

*Religion and technology*



*Figure 18 Virtual Mass*



*Figure 19 Buddhist monks using internet*

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## Biography - Sofija Drecun

### Manager and producer in theatre, radio and culture

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## Education

### Formal:

#### 2011:

- Enrolled in the MA studies, joint programme, between the University of arts in Belgrade and Universite Lumiere Lyon 2, UNESCO department for **Cultural policy and management**, in the class of Milena Dragicevic Sestic.
- Graduated **Managament and production in theatre, radio and culture**, on the Faculty of Drama arts in Belgrade, with the grade point average **9,65/10**. During the final year of BA studies I received a scholarship from The Fund for young talents of Serbia.

## Experience

#### 2012:

- **Internship at Photography Development Center:** project writing, market research, correspondency, creative thinking etc.
- **Internship at Ernst & Young, HR department:** recruitment process, promotional activities / job fairs, administrative work, People Soft software (employees database management, recruitment software (TALEO), CSE Leave management, Market positioning reports etc.

#### 2010:

- **Internship at the Ministry of culture, Republic of Serbia, department for contemporary creativity and creative industries, on the Open call for financing and co-financing projects in culture, art and science for the year 2011.**
- **Coordinator and selector** of the main programme of Festival of International Student theatre **FIST06**.
- **Chief editor** of the bulletin of FIST06.
- **Executive producer** of the film „Krik“(The Cry), (screened at Hong Kong short film festival, Tokyo short shorts, Cinema city in Novi Sad, etc).

#### 2009:

- **Assistent coordinator of marketing on the FIST05**, in charge of digital media and the catalogue.

#### 2008:

- **Organizer** of the theatre play "Mozak Afrodizijak".
- **Assistent coordinator** of the main programme of FIST04.

## Language

- **English:** Fluent - Euroexam test level B2.
- **French:** A1/2. - Started intensive learning.
- **Spanish:** Beginner

## Special courses, conferences, seminars and trainings

### **2012.**

- Philosophy of the Media – Symposium
- The Corporate communications Experience II
- Share conference
- RESONATE new media festival
- HR Forum AIESEC
- *Visa Youth Leadership seminar for 12 young leaders.*

### **2011.**

- **The HR experience** - Mastering human resources in difficult times.
- **Share music conference**
- *Visa Youth Leadership*

### **2010.**

- Presenting a radio show about foley effects „Summaher“ (authors: Sofija Drecun and Ivana Damnjanović) on the **Student film Festival**.

### **2009.**

- **Music conference „Balkan Beat“.**
- Student visitor at the Audio Engineering Society Fair in Munich.

### **2006 – 2004.**

- „**Prevention of conflicts and peer mediation** “ duration of training 30 hours.
- "**Monitoring and Development of Strategy for School Mediation**" duration of training 24 hours .
- Researcher in the field of psychology at the **Petnica Research Center**.
- Presentation of a research paper „ Socio-cultural Context of Development of Formal Operations “ (authors: Sofija Drecun and Isidora Simovic) on the scientific conference "**Konferencija 3 - Korak u nauku**" (2004.)

## Hobbies and interest

Co-founder of an informal organization **OVER9000** that promotes alternative dance, experimental, electronic and hip hop sound through organizing events, internet promotions and by networking with fans from the region.

Anime. Manga. Internet. Theatre. Film. Japan. Photography. Critique. National Geographic. China. Travel. Music production and management.