

Christianity 2.0

A new religion for a new web

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This paper presents some interim reflections on a three-year PhD project of research into emerging church bloggers in Australia. As an introductory presentation in a panel of papers on online religious identity, community and authority, the aim of this paper is to offer a theoretical platform for approaching religion in the world of Web 2.0, rather than a focus on empirical data. Ultimately, the aim of this paper is to present for consideration some challenges and questions that the use of Web 2.0 applications contributes to traditional notions of religious identity and community.

The emerging church

“Emerging church” is a term borrowed from the title of a book written by Bruce Larson and Ralph Osborne and published in 1970, which addresses some of the failings of the modern church to evangelise in a changing urban world (Larson and Osborne, 1970). While some trace the movement’s beginnings to the “Death of God” theological campaign of the 1960s, the Jesus Movement of the 1970s and the experiments of alternative worship in the UK and USA in the 1970s and 1980s, such “top-down” histories ultimately fail to fully explain the movement in its current form, as the emerging church exists in localised communities that are isolated if not loosely connected to other similar local groupings. It cannot lend itself, therefore, to historical approaches that have described the birth of other Protestant and Pentecostal movements and denominations. Indeed, expressions of the emerging church can be seen in almost every Protestant denominational system in the English-speaking world. In Australia, communities that would describe themselves as “emerging” are

present mainly within Anglican, Baptist, Churches of Christ and Uniting (former Methodist and Presbyterian) denominations.

The emerging church may be described simply as a development from, or reaction to, traditional or modern expressions of Protestant Christian community, that recognises and values Christianity's marginalisation in a pluralist late modernity. It explores new models of worship, spirituality, organisation and mission, embracing contemporary technological methods while honouring and seeking a return to ancient faith expressions. It has ethical and theological objections to "mega-church" models of contemporary evangelicalism, which is seen as corrupted by consumerist culture and its values that are antithetical to the Gospel. The label "emerging" may be substituted with "postmodern" or "missional" (Driscoll, 2006: 88).

Lacking a structure comparable to traditional denominations, including a common doctrine, financial resources, clerical support and systems of authority, emerging church communities, or members therein, have found computer-mediated communication the most efficient method of connecting with other groups and individuals, and find a place within the global emerging church community. Blogs have become both the most numerous and the most prominent source of information and locus of interaction on the emerging church phenomenon. Thus bloggers are becoming the "gatekeepers" of the movement; gifted with the power and responsibility to present the emerging church community as it exists beyond the local congregation. How bloggers negotiate and distribute these powers and responsibilities is an issue of concern for the wider research project.

The research

Sites of thirty Australian bloggers were identified for data collection and analysis. Blog sites were identified according to the following rules:

1. The site is described as exploring the emerging church, emergent church, postmodern church (or church/faith in postmodernity) or missional church.
2. OR The site is listed in Technorati under one of the above tags.
3. AND The blog author comments on a number of other such blogs.
4. OR He/she lists such blogs in the site's published blog roll.
5. AND The blogger is Australian or residing in Australia.

Information was collected from blog posts during the period 1 July through 31 October 2006, plus 28 days of comments to each of the posts. The data has been compiled for analysis according to the following categories, or "relationships":

1. **Blogger-site relationship:** information regarding the blogger's presentation of self through the ongoing construction of the site, including:
 - a. Design and layout
 - b. The site's title and accompanying self-descriptions (e.g. blurbs, subtitles and "About Me" sections)
 - c. Use of tags or categories in the ordering of posts
 - d. Discourses in the blog posts, and in particular religious discourses, including theology, evangelism, reflections on scripture, social commentary, and reflections on church structures.
2. **Blogger-audience relationship:** information that reveals how the blogger maintains connections to his or her readers, and the relationships between those who comment, including the presentation of rules of behaviour in comment threads, messages about the author's own blogging, and the use of "redundancies" in comments (e.g. welcoming or thanking commenters for their entries).

3. **Blogger-blogsphere:** bloggers' opinions about, and contributions to, conversations present in other emerging church blogs, messages supporting or promoting other blogs and sites, and recognition or dispute over the authority of themselves or other bloggers.

In addition, sixteen of these bloggers were interviewed. Discussion topics in the interviews included their blogging habits, their knowledge of their site's audience, their presumed or imagined audience, their introduction to blogging and reasons for entering the blogosphere, their conceptions and judgments of the emerging church blogosphere, and their experiences of and involvement in the emerging church offline.

The following sections are reflections based on the information provided in the interviews with bloggers, the posts on their sites and the comments on the sites on other blogs in the sample. These reflections are presented according to the following themes: a Christian approach to the Internet and "being online"; the search for Christian connection online and the presentation of identity; the search for authentic religiosity in the virtual world; and relationships between online and offline expressions of the emerging church movement.

The Cyber-Christian

Emerging church bloggers who have participated in interviews with me so far have offered me a glimpse of their lives on, beyond and with the screen. For some, especially those under the age of thirty, the blog has been a tool to consolidate thoughts and feelings about faith. Ideas and emotions make sense to them when they post it online, like writing in a diary or thinking out loud. These bloggers report that connecting to others online through their sites happened accidentally, organically, when an unknown readership appears in comments. Within a small time frame, their blogging evolved from a private enterprise to a humble introduction to strangers and acquaintances who make surprise visits to their site. As one blogger notes on his site after having sat an interview with me:

But he was asking me about whether or not I write for the people who read, or for my own good. Often for me I think it's about trying to help me sift through stuff that's going on in my head, but sometimes it is purely because something interests/excites/angers me and so I want to let others know.

Was also interesting thinking about the stage I went through with my blogging where I really cared how many people read my blog, and would fully just make up posts so that my readership wouldn't go down. Nowadays I couldn't really be bothered. [...] nowadays I don't blog to get readers. If people read my stuff, then sweet, if not, then I'm ok with it.¹

For these bloggers the Internet has become an extension of the mind, an online memory that becomes a collective memory for the community of readers. Bloggers construct an image of themselves on their sites, that develops with each posted memory and interacts with other online identities.

The interviews have so far revealed that use of the Internet varies widely between bloggers, depending on their access to a connected computer, and the time they have at their disposal to “be online”. But for the majority the computer is a devoted companion. Bloggers are connected both at home and at work. Owning a laptop computer with satellite broadband or Wi-Fi is the greatest pleasure, being online in the lounge room with the television, catching public transport or at the dinner table. Interviewees have reported that not only they have made the Internet readily available to them, but how they have made themselves available online, responding as readily to an email or IM alert as they would a ringing phone or knock at the door. The world behind the computer is just as present to them, generally speaking, than the world inside their office, classroom or dining room.

Brasher tells of the significance that the entry of the computer into society has on religious identity:

Like the words vassal, lord, citizen, and proletarian before it, the word cyborg paints humanness in a historical context. It discloses how the organization of contemporary social and political life is working in consort with computers as the reigning means of production to influence the range of humanness possible in our era. (Brasher, 2001: 145)

Religious bloggers present a challenge to not only how we view “being online”, but how we view “being religious”, as individuals and as communities, churches, and structured organisations.

¹ <http://www.diggerrandle.com/2007/04/writing-for-readers.html>, accessed 15 May 2007.

Consequently, religious bloggers offer us a new approach to understanding of what it means to be human, that may be seen by traditional religious eyes as potentially revolutionary.

Revolutionary, as it calls Christianity to account for the fact that its narratives, symbols are based in pastoral roots, and the doctrines that are formed are based on conceptions of humanity that are born from these symbols. The most contentious of these that I see for the emerging church movement is the theme/meme of “incarnation”. Bloggers talk of the importance of missional community and practice that is informed by incarnational theology. But what does it mean to talk of belief in and response to incarnational theology in a place where we do not take our bodies? This is a paradox that emerging church bloggers must negotiate daily.

Virtual community and authentic identity

When cyber-culture studies migrated from popular magazines into more formal academic pursuits, heralded by Rheingold’s *Virtual Community* in 1993 and Turkle’s *Life on the Screen* in 1996, a celebration of online identity as decentred, multiple and fragmented was the focus. Cyberspace allows for identity play, providing “a moratorium” for people to explore online how they’d like the offline selves to become, finding intimacy without responsibility in online relationships with others, letting imagination dictate how users create online worlds, rather than rules and restrictions (see Lövheim, 2005).

A decade or so later, as researchers move away from email groups and MUDs towards social networking sites and blogs, writers such as Kennedy argue that questions about online identity should be explored in the context of the offline lives of Internet users.

I argue that online identities are often continuous with offline selves, not reconfigured versions of subjectivities in real life; for this reason it is necessary to go beyond internet identities, to look at offline contexts of online selves, in order to comprehend virtual life fully. [...] If internet identity research is to reposition itself conceptually [...] then it needs to engage with and learn from ongoing debates within cultural studies which call into questions the usefulness of the context of identity. (Kennedy, 2006: 860-861)

Hine believes the question of identity must be considered within the context of meaning. Internet users create an online presence as it fulfils a need or a desire, prepares the user for the ongoing search for, or construction of, something of significance for the user, such as a meaningful connection to others, or a satisfying contribution to an online discussion or project. The fruits of these pursuits are not only for life online, but are seen to have benefits for the whole of the user's life, both on screen and on the street (Hine, 2000: 144).

I see already in my research, despite a freedom to create any impression of themselves their imagination allows, that bloggers seek to offer an authentic identity to the blogosphere. By authentic, I mean that bloggers would like viewers of their sites to see them as they would see them in the "real" world, and portray an image of themselves that coheres with their understanding of themselves as religious people.

Bloggers differ in the amount and type of information about themselves they offer. Some post photographs of themselves and family members online, some list the books they're currently reading or CDs they're listening to, some offer email addresses and office phone numbers for contact outside the blog. Most endeavour to portray interests beyond emerging church, such as music, cooking, film, and comic books. Few shy away from telling stories about their personal lives, relationships, work and study. The online identity of any blogger is known not just in the text that appears in each post, but in the whole site's design, including colour schemes, graphics used in the header, footer and sidebars. Hyperlinks, often ordered as lists in sidebars, also offer information about the blogger, by displaying the online world in which the blogger lives.

Some emerging church bloggers are church workers, and their sites are sponsored and supported by their churches. Yet interviews with these bloggers have revealed that the creation and maintenance of a professional identity online, while an important aspect, is not an issue of concern for them. They are willing to portray a personal side that would conflict with audience's expectations

of their role, even risk retribution, if it fosters greater personal connection with their audience. As one blogger shares in an interview with me:

I think for my personality something of that risk appeals to me. Pushing the envelope a little bit and having people respond in ways that are not always in agreeance with what I'm saying. I like that. Not always, at the same time I tend to avoid conflict so I ... But I do like that edgy, pushing-the-envelope and stretching people and being stretched myself. When people disagree with me I think that's good for me, as long as they keep it nice. (Name withheld; interview conducted 19 February 2007)

How bloggers conduct themselves online, how they construct their online religious identities, is significantly informed by the language they use to describe cyberspace. The Internet is not a mission field to them. These bloggers are not out to save souls, or even persuade Christians to join the emerging church movement. As self-professed outsiders in the traditional churches they have lived and worked in, they are looking for like-minded people who will help them grow in faith. Rather than looking for the lost, cyberspace is a place where they themselves can be saved, or at least find something meaningful on the margins of traditional church culture.

Roger Silverstone, as cited by Orgad, argues that identity play is facilitated by online communication where, though apparent distance is dissolved in cyberspace, “proper distance” is vast and insuperable.

Proper distance refers to the importance of understanding the more or less precise degree of proximity required in our mediated interrelationships if we are to create and sustain a sense of the other sufficient not just for reciprocity but for a duty of care, obligation and responsibility, as well as understanding. Proper distance preserves the other through difference as well through shared identity. (Orgad, 2007: 36)

Participants in online communities are safe to play with their own identity, act out of character, misbehave, take on completely new characters, by the fact that no one can see them. For Silverstone, members of offline communities feel safe to share authentic or fake identities based on the knowledge that the repercussions on other facets of their lives, both online and offline, will be minimal.

A community of people to connect with online is important to emerging church bloggers, yet for most bloggers virtual community is less valued than offline community. Bloggers most often seek connections with others online in order to prepare for or strengthen connections in other ways, especially face-to-face interaction. The community made through their blogs is considered significant not just for life online, but for present and future connections in other aspects of life. As another blogger has stated in an interview:

Through the blogs you know a lot about a person through a really narrow field, but it's not until you meet them face-to-face that the relationship actually deepens. So I think people who have actually met having blogs, it's a different community then. [Blogging] provides new opportunities but at the end of the day it's still not the same level of community. (Name withheld; interview conducted 15 October 2006)

Thus emerging church bloggers actively endeavour to reduce “proper distance” in a variety of ways, including establishing and maintaining rules of conduct (and discouraging anonymity) in comments and discussion threads, and maintaining a regularity in blog posts.

Silverstone laments that despite the language of hospitality attributed to the Internet (such as homepage, address, visitor), sites ironically lack “a meaningful host, one who takes responsibility for the welcome” (Orgad, 2007: 38). Clearly this is not the case for participants in my survey. Emerging church bloggers create homes online where viewers are encouraged to engage meaningfully in their quest for spiritual growth. Emerging church bloggers seek connections online that will support and nurture their, often infant, communities offline, and so the identities they construct online will also be congruent with their offline lives, in the search for a way of living authentically in between the screen and the street.

A postmodern embrace

Sherry Turkle, in what has become the standard text book for students of online identity, *Life on the Screen*, says that postmodernism is

characterized by such terms as “decentered,” “fluid,” “nonlinear,” and “opaque.” They contrast with modernism, the classical world-view that has dominated Western thinking since the Enlightenment. The modernist view of reality is characterized by such terms as “linear,” “logical,” “hierarchical,” and by having “depths” that can be plumbed and understood. [...] In a surprising and counter-intuitive twist, in the past decade, the mechanical engines of computers have been grounding the radically nonmechanical philosophy of postmodernism. (Turkle, 1996: 17)

The world is at the disposal of the Internet user on one flat screen. In the one instant there is never just one place where a particular idea, event or action can take place, and there is only one place. At the same moment all things are accessible and only an image of those things are accessible. Space is flattened into two dimensions, yet the user can start, end and maintain a variety of connections with others in a multitude of spaces. Users bask in the flow of information, and with the tools of blogging and folksonomies can create their own reservoirs of data for their own purposes, and redirect it to other users.

Bloggers enter cyberspace with both a sense of awe and a sense of purpose. With reverence to the majesty that is the world they have yet to discover and thanks for every new encounter with it, emerging church bloggers accept that what they know about God, the world and their place in it is byte-sized compared to the terabytes of knowledge awaiting their discovery. They embrace that their grasp of the world is only a small construction, fragile to erosion and transformation by the flow of information. In cyberspace, truth is a concept that is still seeking grounding, but cannot be pinned down by logic or explained by theory. If truth is a mountain, then the Internet will show you an infinite number of paths to its peak, and will present them all as equally valid, depending on where you're coming from. Even belief itself interacts with experiences of unbelief. Religious identity cannot be labelled by denomination, but is always seen as “only a part of the way there”.

Emerging church bloggers, with enthusiasm and with trepidation, enter cyberspace with a view to meet the “other” with a willingness to let that encounter change their worldview, even if only a little. Denominational ties only highlight how “static” modern religious identity is. Emerging church

bloggers choose fluidity over stasis, and being on the margins of religion rather than building a new centre for it.

This even makes the term “emerging church blogger” a problem they must negotiate in forming their online presence. Emerging church bloggers refuse any definition of what the emerging church is. It is at once a movement and a reaction to the movement, a conversation and a practice, a community and a collection of unconnected global diasporas, a new form of organised religion, a rejection thereof, a reclamation of ancient religion, and a redefinition of the word “religion”. But one message comes through clearly: as the emerging church seeks to define itself it ceases to be emerging; it joins the fray of traditions vying for relevance in a world where Christianity is regarded as generally irrelevant. So bloggers maintain a marginal identity, open to challenge and doubt, and actively valuing the beauty of being fledgling and uncertain.

Nationalism, globalisation and being “glocal”

Emerging church bloggers discuss online and have mentioned to me in interviews that the movement/conversation has a tangible Australian character. Some have mentioned a focus on missional theology and praxis is evident in this country, distinct from the progressive theology of the movement in the US or the alt.worship movement of the UK. This thesis is not agreed to by all bloggers interviewed. Nevertheless, despite whether or not there may be a “down-under” flavour emerging in the movement, by no means is there any intention to bring about a formalised organisation that would consider itself the Australian emerging church. While many point to The FORGE Network as the Australian counterparts to emergent.com in the USA, many others (including FORGE itself) considers FORGE to be simply a training network, a connection of like-minded people for the ongoing development of church leadership and mission, and consists of participants who both do and do not identify with terms such as EC.

The influence of emerging church voices in other parts of the English-speaking world (particularly USA, UK, NZ, Canada) is recognised in this country, and that Australian emerging church bloggers interact with overseas bloggers as much and as readily as they do with their compatriots. Yet I believe the search for an Australian “flavour” or “unique focus” (as mentioned above) is in reaction to perceived endeavours to create a global movement or identity that may be defined by people or organisations overseas.

In between nationalism and globalisation exists another phenomenon, “glocalisation”. Being “glocal” is the negotiation of the problem proposed in previous sections: how is incarnational theology and mission to be discussed, affirmed and made central to a movement in a forum where people are disembodied? Being “glocal” means sharing one’s experiences of religion in a local context with others in a setting without borders. It is a reaction to both nationalisation and globalisation, and a rebellion against the traditional denominational structures in which the modern church operates. Being “glocal” invites people from around the world to join in a local mission, rather than forming a global organisation.

Indeed, emerging church bloggers are aware of the danger of, to quote Giddens, a “disembedding” of religious identity out of local context by the movement’s reliance on cyberspace (see Giddens, 1991). The goal of the emerging church blogger is more than to contribute to the conversations in the blogosphere, but to bring those experiences to use in the offline world. One interviewee offers these reflections:

[Emerging church] is a conversation that I think is only useful if it's grounded at some point. I think there's way too much abstract theology in a whole lot of these blogs. That's nice, but it needs to be grounded at some point. My site is focussed on my particular reality. I want to recruit [readers] to their own context. I don't have goals for the blog to grow or be huge. Having a counter on my blog is of use to me as I like to know not how many but where from. My blog is a conversation to try and help people reflect on the Gospel in their own world. (Name withheld; interview conducted 6 March 2007)

These reflections show that emerging church bloggers operate in a world of paradox. For many entering cyberspace is not a discrete step, but permeates their offline life and ministry. All are called to encounter virtual identities and enter virtual community with a theology rooted in stories and symbols that challenge or reject such “virtual” notions. They embrace being on the margins of the church but seek a centre in a place that has no such thing. They find refuge in cyberspace and a dependence on the support and care found therein, yet fear and lament becoming lost in there, disconnected from local mission. To construct an emerging church identity is to negotiate these paradoxes. It a tension which fosters creativity, freedom and purpose for bloggers and audiences alike.

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