

Emerging church bloggers in Australia:

Prophets, priests and rulers in God's virtual world

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Start date and expected completion date: 03/2006 – 03/2009

Abstract

The "emerging church" movement is a growing campaign for change within Protestant traditions of Christianity in the Western world. Lacking a denominational structure and financial resources, the movement relies on CMC for community support, information and collaboration.

Blogging has become a popular vehicle for proponents of the movement to reflect on experience, share ideas with others, and find a sense of belonging (where their views may be seen as marginal in their faith communities or institutions).

This research intends to explore how blogging technology enables members of the "emerging church" movement to construct identity and community, and to what extent are bloggers shaping the development of the movement in Australia.

Aims and Background

Web log technology is making the production of online content increasingly simple, inexpensive and accessible, to the point that any tourist with a blog can become a travel writer, or any church member a theologian.

The "emerging church" has embraced Internet technology like no other religious movement, primarily because the Internet is its only effective means of communication outside its small, localised and independent communities.

The emerging church exists largely under the radar of the local denominational church and has no shop front. It is simply a non-denominational [sic] approach to church life that lacks structure, programs and often paid clergy. It is based around relationships and community and seeks to re-discover the Christian faith within the context of a postmodern society. If [you] want a good feel for what the emerging church is, you'd do well to "Google it" first.

(Blog post 2 March 2006, *EmergentListingOz*)

Blogging has become a popular vehicle for Christians to express their dissatisfaction with modern religious institutions, and their allegiance to, aspirations for, and concerns regarding the “emerging church” movement. Blogging has also become a means by which issues important to the movement are discussed at national and global levels, through comments, blog rolls and hyperlinks. Bloggers are not isolated commentators of religion; they are part of a growing online network of thinkers about the future of Christianity.

For these reasons bloggers in Australia play a significant role in shaping the development and mission of the “emerging church” movement, and promoting an increasingly prominent alternative to modern expressions of Christianity. So the research question I dare to ask is twofold:

How are blogging technology and its usage enabling bloggers to construct personal and community identities for the “emerging church” movement?

How are bloggers shaping how the “emerging church” movement in Australia sees its past, present and future?

“Prophets, priests and rulers” are three biblical images that illustrate the three-fold image of Christian leadership in the western Protestant tradition. As bloggers are becoming the online gatekeepers to the “emerging church” movement in Australia, this research is interested in seeing how blogging technology shapes and enables the prophetic, priestly and regal voices of “emerging church” bloggers.

Heidi Campbell, in a paper presented to the American Academy of Religion conference in Philadelphia, notes that research into religion online is moving into a third wave, particularly in regard to the formation of religious identity and religious community. She asserts that the first wave of research (from 2000 to about 2002) has been mainly descriptive, seeking to discover how community is formed online, and how CMC helps to construct identity. The second wave (2002 – 2004) saw a move to a more definitional and comparative set of studies, asking how online communities act to reshape definitions of community and culture. The third wave (from 2005) is more involve in the relationships between online and offline identity and community construction in religion. The third wave of research seeks to understand the wider social, cultural and political conditions in which online religion finds itself, and the reciprocal impacts that occur between online religious community and offline religion, and how people navigate their way through both to construct a religious identity.

This study endeavours to contribute to this third wave of research into religion online, in its seeking to provide:

- an understanding of the social and cultural environment in which “emerging church” blogging is developing,

- an understanding of how new CMC technology is impacting on the use of online resources for religious purposes, and
- an understanding of how online religion is impacting on how people view religion in a wider national context.

Significance and Innovation

The Enlightenment project of the modern period campaigned for the separation of Church and State, the privatisation of religion, and the removal of religious authority from political and social discourse. Yet the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen a renewed interest in the role of religion in the public sphere, involving, among other factors, a strong Evangelical Christian presence in television and partisan politics, concerns and questions over the relationship between religion and terrorism, and the call for Australians to seek out and define “Australian values”.

As the Internet becomes a popular source of information, interpersonal and mass communication in Australia, it is increasingly able to assert itself as a major alternative to Christian communities (such as congregations, dioceses and para-church organisations) for those who seek to construct a Christian identity and those who desire to make their own religious convictions known to the public.

The Internet has thus become an important vehicle in the establishment and progress of the “emerging church” movement beyond the confines of denominational structure. This endeavour to understand the relationship between the Internet and the rise of this movement within Australian Christian society will, I believe, also provide insights into the changing nature of religious discourse in that society, and to discover the future of denominationalism and modern institutionalised Christianity in this country and its place in popular religious discourse.

In only a few short years, blogging has become a popular means of communicating on the world wide web, not only as personal journals, but as a mode of interaction, and is becoming a popular alternative to online message boards, group emails and discussion groups. The impact of blogging on how users and readers construct a religious identity has not yet been explored. I know of concurrent works into research on both blogging and “emerging church” theology, yet none on the two issues tied together, and none in a specific Australian context.

Methodology

1. Literature review of Australian religious sociology

Through a review of available literature, I intend to provide a picture of the social, cultural and political context from which the “emerging church” has developed, its theological convictions and its critique of Christianity in modernity. I intend to show how the particular social and religious context in Australia has led to a uniquely Australian “emerging church” movement or conversation, as opposed to other expressions in North America and the UK.

2. Literature review of blogging technology and usage

Through a review of the available literature, I intent to provide a picture of how blogging (and other Web 2.0) technology facilitates communication and promotes corporate identity, communal discourse and social change. I hope this will offer me some background in shaping a conceptual framework by which to analyse how religious identity is shaped by blogging, both of individuals and the entire sample as a community of bloggers.

3. Collection of data

A sample of 30 Australian blogs will be compiled. Over three different time periods, blog posts will be collected, plus comments to the post over a 28-day period. These three time periods will be 1 July – 31 October 2006, 1 February – 31 May 2007, and 1 November 2007 – 31 January 2008. The expectations and assumptions behind the idea for three sampling periods are that some blogs have short “lives”, and the different periods will account for changes in the sample list, and that particular conversations will take place during Easter and Christmas periods.

4. Content analysis – picture and text

An analysis of blog design will seek to determine:

- the internal relationships between text, image and sound within blogs to produce meaning and construct a blogger’s identity
- the relationships between the use of these devices across different blogs to produce meaning and a common “emerging church” blogger identity

5. Content analysis - discourse

A taxonomy of posts and comments will be produced and analysed to create a picture of the arguments that are shaping the “emerging church” conversation. This taxonomy will cover, but not be limited to, arguments about:

1. theology and christology
2. morality and ethics in faithful living
3. worship and ritual practice
4. congregational mission
5. issues of political and social engagement
6. philosophical and sociological arguments relating to modernity and postmodernity
7. authority (of religious institutions and offices, of scripture, of doctrine)

I will also seek to identify how many arguments are crossed through the following devices:

- pings and trackbacks
- gridblogging exercises
- communal tagging
- the use of Technorati and other web-based tracking programs

By doing this I intend to determine the extent by which arguments are developed through communal blogging, and how this helps to construct religious community.

7. Interviews with bloggers

Interviews will be conducted with a sample of the producers of these blogs. Interviewees will be questioned on:

- their Internet usage, and how this reflects their production of content
- their understandings of the “emerging church” movement and their involvement in it, especially in relation to older institutions of religion
- how the Internet has informed them regarding their involvement
- the audiences for which they produce content, and their responses to audience participation
- the attitudes of the wider institutions of which they are a member (e.g. denomination or para-church organisation) toward their production of online content

Data from respondents will be analysed to determine:

- how online religious content is governed by Internet technology
- how participation of audiences is determined by the technology
- how the production of online religious content is governed by current institutional politics and economics.

8. Survey of media content on the “emerging church” movement

A sample of literature on the “emerging church” movement will be drawn from both religious media (newspapers and magazines) and other public media (newspapers, radio and television) to illustrate the movement as seen by religious institutions and the wider Australian public.

Timeline

NOW – 31 December 2006	Literature review
1 August 2006 – 28 February 2008	Data collection (of blogs and media)
1 March 2007 – 31 December 2007	Interviews
1 July 2007 – 30 June 2008	Content analysis
30 September 2008	First draft completed

Questions and Issues

Conceptual framework

The important issue for me at this time is developing a conceptual framework that will govern my analysis of the online content. I have a lot more reading to do, however previous research into religion online has not covered the use of blogs so I’ll be doing much of this on my own. If any in our group is researching blogs, in either a textual, design or discursive analytical format, I’d appreciate hearing about what they’ve learned.

Another important question is tied in with the previous issue, that of genre in discourse analysis. Many bloggers use a particular style of writing or genre, or a set of genres, in their posts, including poetry, photography, and even parody. If there has been any writing or discussion on the use of genre in online discursive practice or theory, I’d love to know about it.

Identifying the sample

As many bloggers have different understanding of what the “emerging church” is, and whether it is a “movement”, a “conversation”, or a “style of worship”, so many bloggers are reluctant to say they are a member of the movement, or even to use the words “emerging” or “emergent” to describe their theological or ecclesiological position. Yet other bloggers would identify them as “emerging church” adherents or sympathisers. I would appreciate some advice on how to determine whether a particular blogger should be included in the sample, or at least how to define/describe common elements in the sample list.

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