

# RELIGION 2.0

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*HERALDING A NEW WAVE OF ONLINE RELIGION*

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The Internet is evolving. The introduction of Internet-based applications and programs have led to a new system of production, distribution and consumption of online content that is facilitating interaction between users and resulting in the exponential growth of Internet sites around the world. Religion online is having a greater impact on how we experience church than ever before. As the Internet moves from Oldweb to Web 2.0, will religion in Australia also be replaced by something better, more user-friendly?

The phrase, Web 2.0, was first coined by Tim O'Reilly and John Battelle to describe a new set of Internet applications such as *social networking sites*, *wikis*, *file sharing networks*, *folksonomies*, and *syndication sites*. *Social networking sites* include websites such as myspace® and Facebook, where users create their own personal web pages in order to create and maintain connections with other users. *Wikis* are single web pages that allow for "collaborative authoring", i.e. data input and editing from many authors in any location. *File sharing networks* include sites like flickr™ and YouTube™, where users offer still images and videos (respectively) for storage and free distribution among other users. *Folksonomies* ("folk taxonomies") are websites like Technorati™ and del.icio.us, where "tags" are employed by the sites' users to collect, order and reference information found elsewhere on the world wide web. *Syndication sites*, or "feeds", are pages that appear in a range of web sites, like weblogs and wikis, that contain data read by web-based programs (like Bloglines.com and Google Reader) and some web browsers (such as Mozilla Firefox and the latest version of Microsoft Internet Explorer), in order to alert these programs to new information published on their host sites. A user can create an account on Google Reader and list the location of the syndication feeds of all the weblogs the user likes to read. Google Reader will then alert the user when new information is posted on the weblogs.

These new systems of online information storage and sharing represent a new step in the evolution of online technology, communication and culture. Ten years ago, as Internet connections started to become commonplace in Australian households, online communication accessible to the ordinary user was limited to email, news groups, instant messaging and chat rooms designed by outside operators. Personal web pages were created by only those who had some time to learn basic HTML script, and some money to buy web space through their Internet service provider (ISP). These pages were fairly static; any change to web content required the author to remove the page from the site, edit it and send it back. Audiences, or users, of online content were separated by its producers by technical knowledge, access to online storage space, time and money.

Now web-based applications allow users to create and store information online without as much need for knowledge of HTML and other web languages or the purchase of web storage space. Web 2.0 applications allow ordinary users to create personal web pages,

contribute to the creation of online content on group pages, store information online free of charge, and even create systems of online ordering and retrieval.

A number of factors have led to this new step in the evolution of online communication. The first is the increased access of households to the Internet. Ten years ago the basic Internet set up in an Australian home was a dial-up connection, offering no more than 48kbps (or 6 kilobytes per second), that was turned on for no more than one hour per day on average. Now broadband connections carry up to 1 megabyte per second (though the basic set up would only carry 30-35 kilobytes per second, or 256kbps), that is available all day. Australian households, being the greatest media consumers in the world, have seen the web-connected computer move from the parents' study to the family room and children's bedroom desks. Australian life has become more "connected", and we are relying more on the Internet for information and entertainment than ever before.

Another factor is diminished trust in major corporations and institutions holding control of information, especially newspapers and television news programs. Web 2.0 applications have been welcomed by those seeking alternatives to mainstream news sources, and Crikey.com.au is a popular example.

The open-source movement is a third phenomenon that paved the way for Web 2.0. Fed up with the poor quality of software produced by the big companies, and their lack of response to the changing needs of their own markets, individuals have collaborated to produce and share alternative software without restriction. In an open-source environment, software is available free of charge to any user, yet there is an assumed agreement that any user that develops improvements on currently used programs will also offer their versions freely.

Considering these factors, Web 2.0 may be seen as a challenge to the institutional structure of information distribution in our society, or even a revolutionary act. The buzz words that are often associated with Web 2.0 are *producers* and *democratisation*. In the world of Web 2.0, the producers of online content are not separated from their audiences. They are, in fact, members of the same group. People logging on to YouTube™ or Facebook to check for new information are using the same sites in the same way as those logging on to offer their own video or music creations. The audiences of YouTube™ and Facebook consist of both users and producers of the sites' contents.

As a consequence, Web 2.0 applications provide alternative settings for the sharing of information that may be rejected, downplayed or ignored by mainstream media platforms. Never before has the Internet had the potential to raise the awareness of issues that are important to audiences not recognised by mainstream media producers. Web 2.0 offers a glimpse of a utopian vision where control of the flow of information is taken from large communication corporations and given back to the public.

Bryan Murley, in a paper to the Civitas Conference (Michigan, 2005) titled, *The Mediahood of All Receivers*, likens the arrival of Web 2.0 with the modern Protestant theological campaign of "the priesthood of all believers". Just as the Reformation challenged the 16<sup>th</sup> century Catholic premise that God is available to the laity only through the priest, the new web challenges the presumption that information is only available to the public through media organisations and their journalists. As in Luther's

campaign that no intermediary is needed to communicate with God, new Internet applications allow direct access to find and contribute to the flow of information in society.

While Murley does not want to draw too large an analogy between Web 2.0 and Christ as “the bridge” between information and public, and God and humanity, his thesis does highlight the claim that these new Internet technologies are ideological in nature. Where some media scholars argue that no new technology enters society without some sort of moral or ideological value, they see Web 2.0 being embraced by people who seek a change in the current system of information distribution and control.

Weblogs, known more conveniently as blogs, are by far the most popular manifestation of Web 2.0, with over 57 million sites, and approximately 100,000 created each day, according to the latest press release by Technorati™. The blog is, in its simplest form, an online diary, a collection of articles (or posts), organised in reverse chronological order. The diary page is powered by a blogging program which allows the user to enter new information without having to edit and republish the entire site. Blogger™, WordPress.com and TypePad® are among the most popular blogging software programs, that allow users with limited knowledge of web design to produce individual blogs either on the users’ own storage site or on the program’s own server. Most of these blog programs are free of charge.

Blogs don’t exist in isolation from each other. As authors read books, so bloggers also read others’ blogs. Bloggers respond to comments made about their posts. They publish lists of their favourite bloggers on their blog’s front page or sidebar. They make references to posts on other blogs, with hyperlinks so readers can follow conversations occurring over multiple sites. Bloggers recognise they are part of a blogging community, recognise common blogging etiquette and rules of behaviour, work to build friendships and relationships of collegiality and trust with other writers.

What impact can be seen of blogging and Web 2.0 on religion? Since the Internet became a household name, we have used the world wide web for religious purposes. We have joined chat rooms to talk about how to make relevant and inclusive worship spaces. We’ve subscribed to email lists to connect with people of the same denomination across the globe. We’ve read online magazines that criticise the actions of bishops and priests. Our churches have made web pages displaying photos of our buildings and published our pastors’ contact details and preaching times. We’ve joined newsgroups seeking alternative forms of spiritual practice. Almost every form of religious community in the offline (“real”?) world has had a counterpart form on the web, where people congregate to pray together, worship together, discuss social justice and theology, write songs and make art, make community and care for one another.

If we see these traditional online, or Oldweb, gathering spaces as “online churches”, then blogs can be likened to “online house churches”. While the email lists, newsgroups and chat rooms of Oldweb were constructed by religious groups and organisations, whose moderators were relatively faceless and impersonal, blogs have become meeting points where the host is only too keen to let him or herself be known, to welcome the user into “his/her own space”. And while email lists and chat rooms had relatively few links to other online places, bloggers are only too eager to show you which other house churches they attend, invite you to join them there, and give you directions. The networks of blogs

becomes a neighbourhood of house churches, where bloggers and audiences meet in different places, even at the same time.

Sociologists, theologians, and cultural theorists involved in the fifteen year old tradition of research into religion online have always debated about the future of Christianity, and whether the Internet will lead to a rebirth of a spirit-filled people, or to the ultimate demise of organised religion. Many now agree that online forms of religious community serve more as a complement than as a replacement to religious expression and communion in the offline world. For many, the virtual provides a space to explore new forms of religious expression that can be carried into life offline, and for them the virtual church offers a glimpse for what “real” church could be like. For the same people, however, there are elements of “real” church that cannot be replicated online. So they seek a harmony in their online and offline religious experiences.

There are some challenges that Web 2.0, and in particular blogging, may present to religious life in offline society:

*New religious language.* A media ecologist will say that as people use new forms of media technology to communicate, new forms of discourse will emerge to fit the medium. Already it can be seen that bloggers tend to shy away from using the terms favoured in academic discourse upon which modern theology was developed, and is still taught to seminarians today. As bloggers, and their audiences, reflect on their experiences, contextual theology will favour the language of online communication, and academic discourse will become increasingly alien. Don't be surprised to see the word “G-d” printed on your next online newsletter, or your church's mission statement described as “our dna”.

*Contextual theology.* Those who fear the rise of online religion will lead to the death of organised religion in society worry about the authority of the blogger to speak of theology. I believe, however, that the greater challenge to organised religion is how we do theology, rather than who does it for us. As life online becomes an increasingly important part of our lives offline, and as we are given greater permission to share our own views about God and the world in Web 2.0, theologies developed in the cloisters of the seminary will have little relevance. Instead, questions of how God is and acts in the blogosphere and out of it will produce new conversations and directions for religious expression and action.

*Big is not so beautiful.* While the “mega-church” model of evangelical Christianity has become the ideal of “successful ministry” in mainstream media, religious life in Web 2.0 seeks intimate and strong connections with a relative few. As the blogosphere is filled with a multitude of options, users will seek a small niche by which to connect closely with like-minded seekers.

*“Glocalisation”.* Users seek connections with people on the web regardless of their location, to build important relationships, find belonging and enhance their religious life in their own contexts. Religion online offers a global perspective to local life. The merging of these two outlooks devalues the impact of regional and national structures on which today's religious denominations are organised. In the future, a congregation's connection to their archbishop or moderator may matter less than their connection to a

congregation in South Africa, South Dakota or South Korea with whom they are sharing liturgies, hymns and mission projects.

As a researcher of online religion, I believe that the greatest challenge of Web 2.0 to the future of religion in society will be for those watching its development. As the Internet becomes an increasingly integral part of life, and a dominant source of information for the average user over television, radio and newspapers, and as the average user becomes more integrated into online life, able to produce and publish information with greater ease and skill than ever before, researchers will see that online identity and community is not to be separated from life offline. Instead, bloggers are using their new medium to share experiences, desires and attitudes of religion offline with their online world, with a goal to bring what they've learned online to the offline religious life.

Indeed, the gifts of Web 2.0 are both the inclusion of the average user in the production and distribution of information, and the integration of weblife in the average user's daily life, whether religious or not. How offline religious communities, denominations and organisations are fuelled by the Internet, rather than how they are affected by the online religious lives of their individual members, will be the next challenge of researching religion online.

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