

Identity construction in the “emerging church” blogosphere:

Building a theoretical framework

What makes an “emerging church” blogger? How does someone assert oneself as a member of this fledgling and fluid community of web site creators, set apart from other Christians in the blogosphere? And what is it about them that sets them apart as a community? This paper will provide one theory for understanding the process by which identity is made for bloggers in and about the “emerging church” movement. It intends to come up with a framework by which to see how the discourses and text in these blogs contribute to the formulation of identity, particularly religious identity, for individual “emerging church” bloggers and the blogging community.

Identity construction as a social process

The work of Lövheim and Linderman (2005) has been most helpful in providing an understanding for how identity is constructed on the Internet, and has offered a strong basis for further theorising religious identity construction in the particular field of blogging. They draw on the previous work of Goffman, Giddens, Putnam and Slevin, giving new insights into how identity is developed and maintained in society, and what both modernity and CMC bring into play in identity construction.

The construction of personal identity, according to Lövheim and Linderman, is a social project, in that it is borne on a reflexive process between the individual and the social context in which the individual interacts (pp. 121-122). When talking about religious identity, this may involve socialisation into a community whose collective identity is adopted by an individual, or at least some of its values and beliefs are assumed into the individual's belief system and values (p. 123). Dependent on their place within the authority structure, individuals also contribute to the collective identity of the community, which may also be the result of a process between itself and the wider society.

The writers note Giddens' critique of modern society, where there is a “disembedding” of social interaction out of the local context. Technological advancement has facilitated mobility and telecommunication, resulting in the development on non-localised social activities and the loss of power of face-to-face interaction in the construction of identity. As local institutions become less authoritative, knowledge becomes more relative, and identity construction becomes a project of increasing uncertainty (p. 123).

The Internet may be seen as a contributor to this “disembedding”, in its disintegration of borders of space and time across the globe. Despite the pessimism of Giddens' critique, the Internet offers freedom for people to explore new ideas and values, and a wide new arena to construct religious identities, particularly for those who experience marginalisation or rejection in their local contexts and traditional institutions of religion.

Online communication also frees the user to have greater control over what she or she will present to others online. In many online settings users have the control to construct virtually *any* identity, regardless of whether it accurately reflects their offline persona. Online, users construct a personal **virtual identity**. For example, in any online discussion group, users could choose whether to disclose their true name, age, gender identity, occupation, etc. This high level of control, it may be argued, allows for greater freedom of expression and interaction. For a crude diagrammatical representation of this theory, see figure 1 below.

For Lövheim and Linderman, social trust is an essential ingredient in this process of identity construction through socialisation. Trust enables interaction, which builds what Giddens calls *social capital* (which is simply the level of interaction). The more interaction that occurs between individuals, the greater the social capital in the setting. The greater the social capital within a situation of social interaction, the greater the facility of adopting common values and beliefs, and the facility of constructing an identity within that context (p. 122-123).

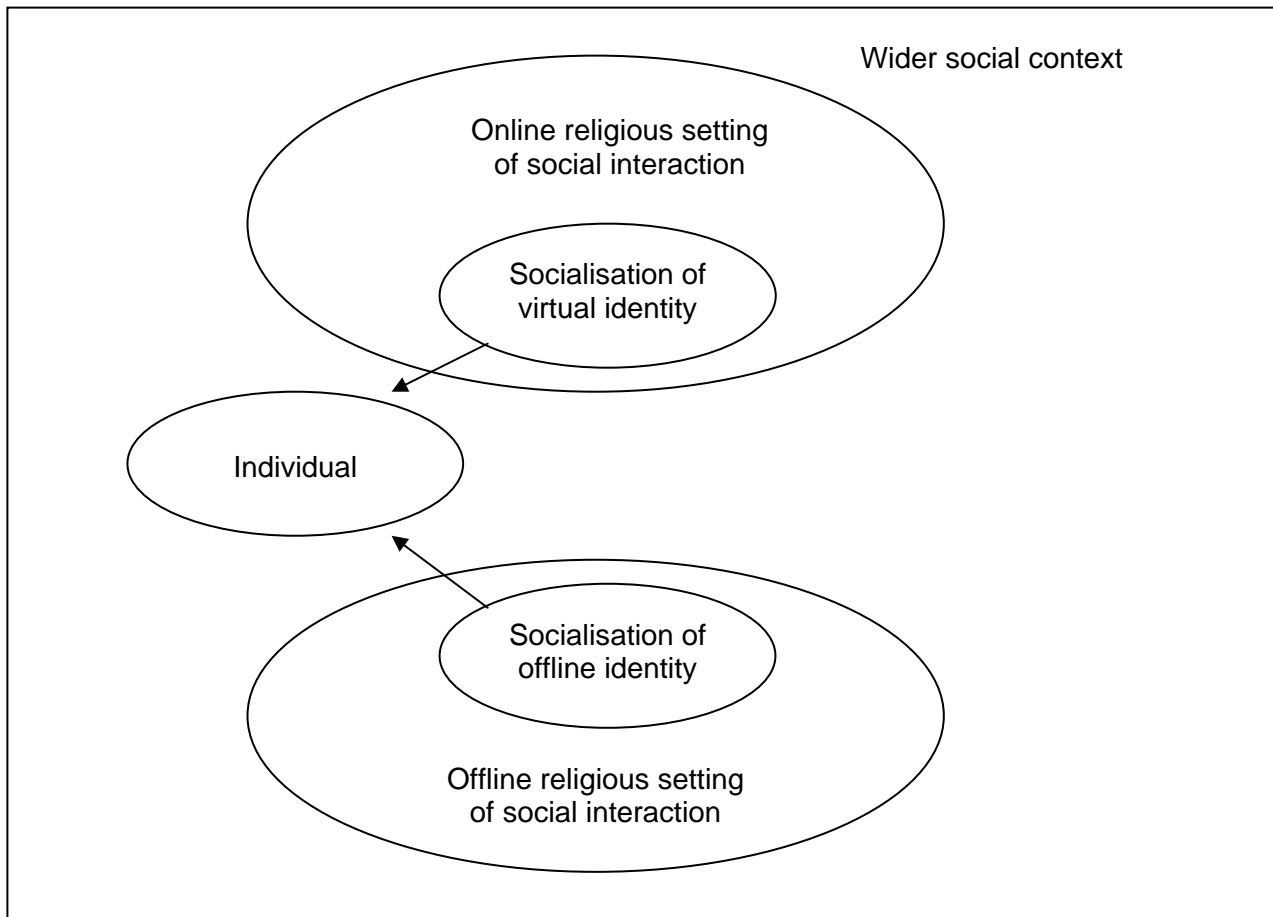


Figure 1. *Construction of religious identity*

Building social capital demands certain conditions. Firstly, it requires that there is a common understanding of the key definition of the situation of interaction. Secondly, it needs a shared understanding of the rules of interaction. Simply, community members must know what the purposes of the community are, and what are right and wrong ways of relating to each other (p. 125-126). Entry into this situation of social trust requires that one acknowledges and adheres to these conditions for social capital to build.

“Emerging church” identity construction on the Internet

The Pew Internet & American Life Project’s *Faith Online* (Hoover, Clark et al., 2004) reports that those who use the Internet for spiritual or religious purposes do so as “a *supplement* to, rather than a *substitute* for offline religious life” (p. ii, emphasis in original publication). Campbell’s presentation of a study on membership in three online Christian communities, confirms and build on this assertion. Her key findings were that:

- involvement in online Christian communities does not cause people to leave or shy away from real world participation,
- people join these communities for relationships with others, rather than information, and
- descriptions made of online community provide critiques of real world situations, to the extent that online community presents a vision for how the offline world should be more like. (Campbell, 2003: p. 223)

These findings would support the claim mentioned above, that the Internet provides an alternative social setting for those who experience marginalisation, of some form or another, in offline religious communities. They may also support the claim that the Internet supports freedom of interaction, as building relationships is the attraction of the Internet to many users.

Moreover, they would indicate that those involved in online religious communicative settings bring with them an already developing religious identity. Members of these online communities would bring with them their own values and beliefs, and assumptions about their values, beliefs and practices of others in

the network. The development of the conditions for social capital will not happen in isolation on the Internet, just as the construction of religious identity of users will not happen exclusively online. That which defines the online religious context, and the rules of interaction in that context, will be challenged and/or complemented by the offline experiences of its members.

This issue is particularly salient for “emerging church” bloggers, for a variety of reasons:

- The “emerging church” movement is not older than the Internet, and in many ways the growth of the movement offline is concurrent with the growth of online settings.
- Few people are born into the “emerging church” movement, and many bring into the movement somewhat already established religious identities, and assumptions about the values, beliefs and practices of others.
- The “emerging church” exists as a global movement **only online**. Local communities of Christian faith that identify with the “emerging church” identity have few or insignificant relationships with other communities in other structures or media, compared to other congregations and communities in their locality, diocese, region or synod.
- Questions about the “emerging church’s” theological foundations, mission directives, or whether it is in fact a unified movement, are still being asked, or are rejected altogether. “What is the emerging church?” is an important point of discussion for many of its members. So there are no agreed criteria by which an individual or congregation of faithful would be classified as “emerging church”, other than their declaration.

So when considering religious identity construction online one must take into account that the field of social interaction is filled with assumptions, values and beliefs that are imported by innumerable offline and other online contexts. How these online social settings negotiate how its members create a common understanding of “emerging church” is a component project for the construction of religious identity of its members.

Blogging

Before there were web logs there were online discussion groups, email groups, static web pages, chat rooms, bulletin boards and other online forums for social interaction. Web logs, in a number of ways, provide the Internet with a unique social space that impacts on how users interact with others in the world wide web.

Blogs are, generally speaking¹, a personal web site, constructed by individual about *them*. Bloggers aim to promote an individual identity in their blog pages, and do this through the design of the web site and through the personal discourses they offer in each post. Each blog is, first and foremost, an online entry into the life and times of the blogger, their portrayal of experiences in and view of the world. Unlike chat rooms and discussion boards, users of the site are made aware that the setting of social interaction is owned by a **person**.

The blogger has a high level of control over the level of interactivity in the blog. Bloggers, depending on their grasp of the technology, have sole power to moderate comments and discussion threads, and to choose who may join in the discussion and even when to stop conversations. Given that discussion threads are generated by commenting to a particular post, the conversation starter is always the blogger, who solely chooses the topic of conversation. Therefore, the conditions that create social capital, i.e. the development of the key definition of the situation of social interaction, and the rules of interaction, are primarily the right and responsibility of the one blogger.

Bloggers do not operate in isolation, however. Bloggers read blogs, and makes their opinions known on the posts of other bloggers. Networking tools in blogging software (such as trackbacking, tagging and RSS), and web-based programs like Technorati™ and web log aggregators allow for bloggers to follow and contribute to discourses across sites, so that the conditions for social capital are determined by a community of bloggers and collective identity may be developed among many sites of social interaction. See figure 2 for a diagrammatical representation.

¹ There are many blogs that are constructed by groups and organisations, who aim to promote their communal or organisational identity. All blogs in the research sample are personal blogs of individuals.

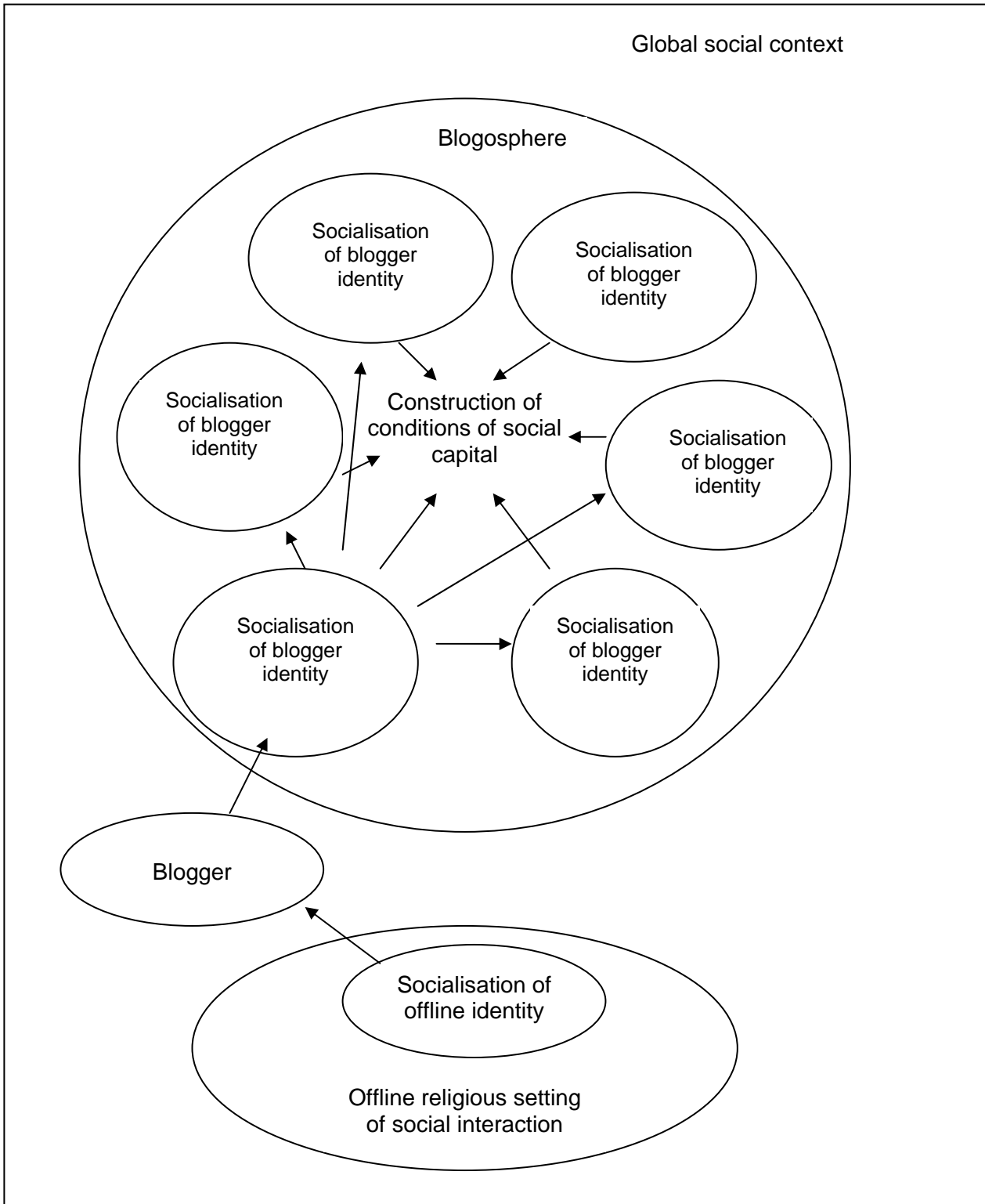


Figure 2: *Construction of religious blogger identity*

The “emerging church” blogosphere

The “emerging church” is a movement which is not allied to any particular religious institution, company or locality. There is no foundational statement of doctrine, philosophy or memorandum of understanding that has authority over all who choose to identify with the movement or adopt the label. So there is no overarching set of conditions of social capital that govern social interaction among “emerging church” bloggers apart from what these bloggers determine among themselves. Thus “emerging church” bloggers have much authority in constructing the collective identity of “emerging church” online. And, given that the Internet is the only medium in which “emerging church” is understood as a movement

beyond local faith communities, the “emerging church” blogosphere has great authority in constructing the identity of the “emerging church” in the world offline.

Whether one blog is considered a member of the community “emerging church” bloggers is dependent on a myriad of factors that is as fluid and unstructured as the movement itself. Blogging technology provides most of the tools for constructing the communal identity, such as:

- **Tagging** posts within a blog, or the entire blog itself, and sending **pings** to aggregator programs such as Technorati™, publicises a blogger’s work and identity as adherents or explorers of the movement to other users of the same aggregator program.
- **Trackbacking** a post of a blogger alerts that blogger that a comment has been posted by another blogger on another blog.
- Bloggers can publish a list of other bloggers they read, called a **blogroll**. Bloggers listed on the blogroll may be alerted of this, if it is pinged to the aggregator program they use.

These tools facilitate discourses about the “emerging church” movement, its theology, mission and place in the wider church and society, and how one should interact, to occur across blogs and other sites in the movement’s online community. In this way, a multi-blog setting for interaction becomes known and defined, and bloggers, together with their readers, contribute to an online “emerging church” community.

Rules for engagement: understanding identity construction among “emerging church” bloggers

To summarise:

1. Religious identity is constructed through a process of social interaction, and may involve socialisation into a religious community holding a shared identity. Trust enables the building of social capital which facilitates identity construction.
2. Involvement in religious community online serves to complement the development of religious identity in offline settings, by offering alternative settings for social interaction.
3. Social capital demands a shared understanding of both
 - a. the key definitions of the situation in which social interaction occurs, and
 - b. the rules for interaction in the setting.
4. The role of bloggers in constructing an “emerging church” identity is important, in their provision of a multitude of spaces for social interaction.
5. The religious identity of “emerging church” bloggers, and their readers, is constructed through a process of interaction with others in the entire “emerging church” blogosphere, within a wider social context in other online settings, as well as offline and in local faith communities. Blogging technology provides unique tools for this interaction to occur.

To understand how an individual constructs and asserts the identity of an “emerging church” blogger involves watching how he or she interacts with others in the blogosphere, and tracking the discourses that flow among blogs about what the “emerging church” movement actually is, and how one should operate within the still developing “emerging church” online world. Each contributor to these discourses brings with them a religious identity that has been formed offline and in other online spaces, making a global “emerging church” identity a massive project, involving a growing number of people who are working to foster a new Christian identity in a postmodern world. The impact that these bloggers will make on how the world sees the “emerging church” will become increasingly important, as they grow into an authoritative source for how the “emerging church” sees itself.

References

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