Chapter 8.4
Believe It or Not:
Virtual Religion in the 21st Century

Susan E. George
University of South Australia, Australia

ABSTRACT

This paper considers the development of virtual communities focusing upon virtual religion and its impact on humanity. It is important that religion is expressed communally and socially, and the Internet has provided a new community context for religiosity, linking people from geographically, socially, and culturally disparate backgrounds, facilitating interactivity as never before in an intriguing anthropological development. We find examples of "online religion" that are already occurring and see technology as playing a crucial positive role in humanity in the 21st century. While there are limitations with virtual interaction compared to face-to-face engagement, there are benefits, primarily that such technology starts to answer the deeper philosophical questions associated with technology, especially the question of how technology cannot rob people of the essence of what it is to be human. By facilitating virtual religion, technology assists the uniquely human pursuit of religiosity, and merely provides a new "meeting place" for exchange.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has created new human communities linking people from geographically, socially, culturally, and otherwise disparate backgrounds. Such virtual communities may be defined as

a collection of people sharing common interests, ideas, and feelings over the Internet or other collaborative networks. Web-based virtual communities have been defined as 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 relationships in cyberspace. These communities are becoming increasing[ly] important forums for individuals and groups that share a professional interest or share common activities. (call for papers for the forthcoming Encyclopaedia of Virtual Communities and Technologies*, editor Subhasish Dasgupta, Idea Group Reference)*

Virtual communities may be considered an outcome of the recent developments in communications technologies and a natural anthropological consequence for humanity embracing

communications technology. They are found in realms as diverse as education and health, recreation and science.

One of the most important human realms in which virtual communities are found is that of religion. The technology underlying "virtual religion" is essentially the communication technology provided by computer science through the Internet. While the original computer networks were never designed as a human communication medium, they have come to penetrate society for communication purposes in many ways — from mobile phones to Internet banking, handheld computers to "intelligent" agents and voice recognition at human-machine interfaces. The Internet has particularly brought people together form all over the world in various online communities and virtual worlds in the new "meeting place" of cyberspace.

The remainder of this paper explores the development of virtual religion and its impact on humanity. First we consider the nature of religion and note that a social and communal expression is vital. As humanity embraces new modes of interaction, we recognize virtual religion as an anthropological consequence of the new technologies. Second, we explore ways that technology is facilitating religious expression, noting it is both supporting conventional practice and enabling new. We pose some questions that have been raised about the validity of virtual religious expression and consider who is interacting in this forum and why.

Third, we move to consider technology in context, noting how it is ideally the application of science for the benefit of humanity, although many people have identified negatives of technology including its power to rob humanity of the essence of what it is to be human. One of the key questions of the generation is how technology can have a positive role in lives. In conclusion, the development of virtual religion is seen as the means by which technology may play a positive role in lives, facilitating as it does virtual communities

and religious expression in a new anthropological context, and promoting, not stifling, the questions that are at the essence of what it is to be human.

RELIGION: REAL AND VIRTUAL

Religion has proved very hard to define. Definitions of religion are often too narrow and exclude many of the belief systems which most people will agree are religious, or they are too vague and ambiguous, leading one to conclude that just about any and everything is actually a religion. Some of the more successful attempts identify a set of markers such as practical and ritual, experiential and emotional, narrative and mythical, doctrinal and philosophical, ethical and legal, social and institutional, and the material (Smart, 1992). The more markers present, the more "religious-like" the belief system is. Sometimes religion is regarded as subjective, designating the feelings and acts of people that specifically relate to God and is distinguished from theology. From this subjective perspective, religion may be defined by the benefits it offers: the inclusion in a social community, the accompanying rights and responsibilities, personal fulfillment, spiritual and emotional benefits from that, and other assets.

One important element of religion is its communal and social expression. In fact, religion is often distinguished from spirituality, which is used to refer to devotional aspects of faith and interior individual experiences (McGrath, 2001). In a Christian context, the "body of believers" has a special significance as the church. The faithful are invited to gather and not cease to meet together, whether that is in a physical church building, or other! The synagogue as a Jewish place of worship literally means a meeting place where people would come together. For Islam, one of the five pillars entails the giving of alms as if all are brother and sister in the same family. For these major world religions, and for many others, the social dimension may be regarded as one of

Related Content

A Two-Tier Approach to Elicit Enterprise Portal User Requirements
Eric Tsui (2008). *End-User Computing: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications* (pp. 1812-1821).
www.irma-international.org/chapter/two-tier-approach-elicit-enterprise/18288

Understanding the Impact of Household End Users' Privacy and Risk Perceptions on Online Behavior
Judy Drennan, Gillian Sullivan Mortand Josephine Previte (2008). *End User Computing Challenges and Technologies: Emerging Tools and Applications* (pp. 13-32).
www.irma-international.org/chapter/understanding-impact-household-end-users/18150

Analyzing the Effects of Reinforcement Learning to Develop Humanoid Robots
Naaima Suroor, Imran Hussain, Aqeel Khaliqueand Tabrej Ahamad Khan (2019). *International Journal of End-User Computing and Development (pp. 55-66).*
www.irma-international.org/article/analyzing-the-effects-of-reinforcement-learning-to-develop-humanoid-robots/250877

A TAM Analysis of an Alternative High-Security User Authentication Procedure
Merrill Warkentin, Kimberly Davisand Ernst Bekkering (2005). *Advanced Topics in End User Computing, Volume 4 (pp. 280-300).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/tam-analysis-alternative-high-security/4483

The Optimization of Supply Chain Financing for Bank Green Credit Using Stackelberg Game Theory in Digital Economy Under Internet of Things
Hui Zhang, Fengrui Zhang, Bing Gong, Xuan Zhangand Yifan Zhu (2023). *Journal of Organizational and End User Computing (pp. 1-16).*
www.irma-international.org/article/the-optimization-of-supply-chain-financing-for-bank-green-credit-using-stackelberg-game-theory-in-digital-economy-under-internet-of-things/318474