Texting and Christian Practice

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INTRODUCTION

Texting (or text messaging) refers to the sending of a short typed message between mobile phones using the Short Message Service (SMS). The practice of texting has become trendy and overwhelmingly popular not only for personal and commercial purposes but also as an essential feature of communication involving all spheres of human life. Ever since texting began in 1992, it has almost replaced other forms of communication and this is attributable to the decrease in costs of texting as compared to the more traditional forms of communication such as letter writing and telephoning. Also, there is the increasing number of offers by mobile telecommunication companies that contribute to the attraction of using texts as the main mode of communication. More importantly, texting encourages creativity in language use and affords the user the opportunity to explore and develop imaginative ways of making computer mediated communication (CMC) work best for them. It also allows texters experiment with language in an informal and playful manner. This belief is gradually leading to the adoption of a 'language of CMC' or 'language of texting' as a genre of language and style unique to CMC (see Crystal, 2006).

According to Gordon (2006), the cell phone (or texting), is a part of our popular culture as well as a tool of the public sphere, because 'on occasions, the ability of the individual to have access to cell phone may have a significant influence not only on personal choices and actions but also on national and international event,' (p.45). And for

individuals and institutions around the world, the constellation of mobile phones, personal computers, the internet and other computing objects have supported a complex set of religious and spiritual needs (Bell, 2006). And given the ways in which religious practices are intimately woven into the fabric of daily life in most parts of the world, it is hardly farfetched to imagine that new information and communication technologies (ICTs) might support a range of existing religious and spiritual activities, as well as helping to create new ones (p.141). Hence, text messaging and Christian practice has been a topic of interest to scholars researching into religion and technology, and interestingly, studies have shown that texting (or SMS) has been utilized for quick religious worship and for enhancing the Christian lifestyle (see Bell, 2006; Campbell, 2006; Chiluwa, 2008).

'Christian practice' is defined here, as the totality of religious behaviour and attitude that conform to the beliefs, doctrines or faith of Christians. This will include worship, prayers, confessions, Bible studies etc. Scholarly studies have shown that religious practitioners have embraced CMC technologies to propagate religious values and practices (Ess, Kawabata & Kurosaki, 2007). Not only is mobile telephony and the Internet a trendy platform for Christian practices, it also provides an active and trusted medium for other religions like Islam, Hinduism and Judaism to disseminate their doctrines and enforce their beliefs (Fukamizu, 2007; Campbell, 2006). In their article: 'how the iPhone became divine...' Campbell and Pastina (2010), show that the mobile phone culture has become indispensable to religion. The study ex-

plores the significance of labeling of the *iPhone* as the 'Jesus phone' and demonstrates how religious metaphors and myth can be appropriated into popular discourse and help shape the reception of a technology.

OVERVIEW

The study of religion in the context of computer-mediated communication (CMC) began with the growth of the popularity of the Internet and mobile telephony. Dr. Heidi Cambell at Texas A&M University; Dr. Pauline Hope Cheong at Arizona State University, Tempe; and Christopher Helland at Dalhousie University, Halifax are among the leading experts in the field of religion and digital culture.

Campbell's (2005) *Exploring Religious Community Online* and W*hen Religion Meets New Media* (2010) are invaluable accounts of how religious practitioners and communities connect to their online and offline networks and the issue of religious shaping of technology and vice versa. These studies adopted the social shaping of technology (SST) approach (Zimmerman-Umble, 1992) to explain the adoption of communication technology by religious adherents. This approach further studies how and why a community of users responds to a technology in a certain way and helps to identify what values or beliefs influence this negotiation. According to Campbell (2007), one application of SST is the 'domestication of technology.' 'Domesticating a technology means making choices about the meaning and practice of a technology within this sphere. Thus, a technology is shaped by the setting in which it lives and by the agents who utilize it. Religious user communities can be seen as a 'family of users' who create a distinctive 'moral economy' of social and religious meaning which guides their choices about technology and rules of interaction with them...(p.192). Helland's (2005) 'online religion as lived religion: methodological issues in the study of religious participation on the internet,'

provides a roadmap that addresses methodological issues in the study of religion in the new digital platforms. Heidi Campbell had earlier carried out a review of research in CMC in her chapter contribution entitled: 'approaches to religious research in computer-mediated communication, published in *Mediating Religion: Studies in Media, Religion and Cultured* (edited by Jolyon Mitchell & Sophia Marriage).

Although scholarly studies have concentrated on the use of the Internet for the spread and practice of world religions, a few have touched on the use of text messages to disseminate the Christian religion. Campbell's (2006) 'Texting the Faith: Religious Users and Cell Phone Culture,' (published in *The Cell Phone Reader. Essays in Social Transformation*, edited by A.P. Kavoori & N. Arceneau) appears to be the first major work that accounts for the various ways religious practitioners have applied the culture of texting to practice and disseminate their religious faith. Though this study does not necessarily focus on the Christian religion, it does give a significant general overview of the use of SMS in different religious contexts. A follow-up study by Campbell (2007) entitled: 'What Hath God Wrought? Considering how religious communities culture (or Kosher) the cell phone' provides a more comprehensive account of the religious use of text messaging in particular, exploring the emergence of the 'kosher' cell phone in Israel. Jews are said to be able to send text messages with a prayer or request to a rabbi, who then placed the note in Jerusalem's western wall, thus observing a centuries-old tradition (Katz, 2005).

According to Heidi Campbell the influence of technology (e.g. mobile phone) on religion has become increasingly overwhelming:

From the Pope's daily religious text and prayer messaging services... to Hindus in Bombay avoiding quest at temples by sending prayers to Ganesh via SMS. For a small fee British Muslims can receive verses from the Koran and fulfill their religious duties to give alms to the poor through

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