Chapter 14
Isn't It Real?
Experiencing the Virtual Church in Second Life®

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ABSTRACT

The growing numbers of online religion practice has increased significantly. This growing number is not only based on the website pattern, but also in the 3D online virtual environment. Over the last three years the practice of online churchgoing in the 3D virtual environment has grown rapidly through the arrival of a number of large, well-financed projects supported by well-known real-world Christian groups. This phenomenon has been allowing users not only just participate but also experiencing the online virtual environment. What are the users' experiences in the virtual church? How does this experience relate to users' spiritual life? These issues will be discussed in this chapter, starting with origin of online church. This is followed by the description of the one year study result based on participant observation and interview with the participants. The ability of Second Life as user generated virtual environment to act as medium of ritual practice and kinds of experience fostered will be interesting in the future development of the online church. The empirical based study may contribute greatly to a more nuanced and balanced understanding.

INTRODUCTION

As one of modern communication tools, Internet has been changing our society and communication rapidly. Religion activity as one the growing area has proved that there are significant users who use Internet for their spiritual life. Several researches are done in the past about the online religious life. The research done by *Pew Internet & American Life Project* presented that: 83% of those responding to our survey said that the use of the Internet has helped congregational life (Internet & Project, 2000). In 2004, *Pew Internet & American Life Project* also conducted a research and found that 64% of the America's 128 million Internet users have done things online related to religious or spiritual matters (Internet & Project, 2004). McKenna & West reported in their research that many of the same benefits associated with membership in a traditional religious institution are also associated with membership in a virtual group devoted to one's religious beliefs (McKenna & West, 2007). They found out that many who are participating on the online religious forum are those who are not active church-goers. Thus this participation in these virtual groups allows these individuals to reap important self and social benefits that they would otherwise be missing out on. It also mentioned that these participants are able to reconnect with and strengthen their faith through the virtual fold. If any of the family members involved in the same online religious forum; it will strengthen not only the importance of online group identity for the individual but also the benefits gained from his or her participation. This means that individuals who take part in online religious communities benefit from gains in social support and feel more connected to others who share their faith (McKenna & West, 2007). The social supports that individuals get in the online communities are the same as they get in the traditional religious institutions (McKenna & West, 2007). These include: having larger social support network (Pargament, 1997); having more closest friends which provide powerful form of social support (Argyle, 1996; Francis & Kaldor, 2002); reveal fewer depressive symptoms (Levin & Chatters, 1998); shown to be happier and greater life satisfaction (Myers, 1992); feeling closer with God were correlated with happiness and satisfaction independently of church attendance (Pollner, 1989); and a positive association between religious involvement and self-esteem (Beit Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997).

BACKGROUND

Online religion practice, however dominated by Christianity, but there are other beliefs also present such as; Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist (Helland, 2004). There are several studies on the online religion have been conducted, included: Christian (Campbell, 2004; Casey, 2006; Hutchings, 2007; Young, 2004), Islam (Bunt, 2004; Kalinock, 2006), Sikhism (Jakobsh, 2006) and Buddhist (Macwilliams, 2006; Prebish, 2004). Online religious activities was started from mis-1980s as David Lochhead mentioned in his book *Shifting Realities* (Lochhead, 1997). It began with the use of local bulletin board systems (BBSs) to create 'not only a discussion forum for local evangelicals but also an outreach to non-Christians who might happen to call' (Lochhead, 1997). Howard Rheingold in his book entitled *The Virtual Community* also notes the existence of such groups:

It didn't take me long to discover there isn't enough time in the day to keep up with what is happening in religious BBSs of the San Francisco Bay area. Some are connected with real-life congregations; others are free-form and come in sixteen shades of unorthodox. The **r**ole of communications media in shaping religion has been central since the time…., where coreligionists can find each other, stay in touch between services, and even commune in traditional ways via nontraditional media (Rheingold, 1993).

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