

Cyberpilgrimage: A Study of Authenticity, Presence and Meaning in Online Pilgrimage Experiences

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Abstract

The idea of cyberpilgrimage may be met with scepticism. There may be a sense that pilgrimage via the Internet intrinsically *cannot* be authentic, that without any physical depth, it can only be an affectation, even a caricature, of “proper” (terrestrial) pilgrimage. This “authenticity issue” is crucial, and failure to address it will undermine academic attempts at its study, even while Internet religion becomes increasingly central to understanding contemporary religious expression. This article explores various aspects of the new phenomenon of cyberpilgrimage, framed by a discussion of the potential authenticity of cyberpilgrimage.

Part I: Introduction

The famous mystic al-Hallaj (857-922) described his spiritual union with God in language (“I am the Truth”) ... The official reason for his execution was his teaching that the pilgrimage to Makka could be performed spiritually while staying at home.¹

[1] At www.yfc.co.uk/labyrinth,² text on a plain background welcomes us to an “online translation” of Cathedral Labyrinth, located terrestrially at Grace Cathedral, San Francisco. The Online Labyrinth reproduces its physical counterpart’s eleven-part segmentation, and its trisection into three stages of meaning: Purgation (releasing); Illumination (receiving); and Union (returning). Its status as “sacred space” is suggested by a request to remove one’s shoes before “entering” and reinforced by an image of shoes on sunlit tiles. Visitors “navigate” this inspirational, highly visual website via a labyrinth diagram comprising eleven “station”-like links, performing occasional tasks such as positioning virtual candles on an altar. As dreamy “New Age” music plays, a pacific, slightly electronic-sounding female voice directs the “pilgrim” in necessary actions, intoning psychospiritual guidance and irenically citing scriptural passages.

[2] “This is holy space,” “she” says. “This is your space to be with God and God’s space to be with you.” We “focus on moving Godwards ... We travel towards God as pilgrims, and yet God is with us as a traveller.” She is our cyberguide, a perfected ascetic, dispassionate and disinterested, whose body the logic of science has transcended. As Goldenberg wrote, people in “the West” have now transcribed their culture’s peculiar religious heritage, the notion “that human life is a rough copy of something out there—something better, wiser and purer” onto technology,³ culminating in the “understanding” that an omnipresent God might be present “in the machine.” What might this mean for religion and Religious Studies? How might it alter our concepts of, and relationships with, pilgrimage, worship, sacredness, reality, and community? Is there potential for technologisation of our most personal and collective religious landscapes, our “souls” even, and should we fear this or embrace it? What is the relationship between body and mind in navigating religious terrain as pilgrims?

[3] The questions “cyberpilgrimage” raises, and the challenges it poses to terrestrially orientated understandings of “experience”, are profound and difficult; and at this early, unpredictable stage, particularly given the rapidity of technological evolution, academic commentary will likely never keep pace. I think it possible, though, to elucidate some important aspects of cyberpilgrimage and to offer theoretical proposals, and these are my two overarching goals. So, after sketching the

subject's academic background and making some terminological points, I consider notions of physicality, non-physicality, and *physicalisation* of ritual. I then introduce the important concept of *co-location*, and discuss the potential for cyberpilgrimage to be viewed in complementary relationship with terrestrial pilgrimage. I investigate cyberpilgrimage's tradition-preserving and tradition-transmitting functions, and cyberpilgrimage as a mediated pathway linking the physical and metaphysical. Lastly, I offer ideas concerning "cybersacredness" and illusion.

[4] I wish to argue that cyberpilgrimage constitutes a meaningful and authentic contemporary expression of the pilgrimage tradition, suggesting a need to broaden extant pilgrimage theories. Of course, "pilgrimage" does not mean the same thing to everyone: it varies from tradition to tradition, from pilgrimage to pilgrimage, and from pilgrim to pilgrim. Furthermore, the primacy in "the pilgrimage experience" of the mind, of what Morinis called "psychosomatic sensations" is already well-attested, constituting "the most significant aspects of pilgrimage in the view of participants themselves."⁴ Yet notions of pilgrimages as *terrestrially based* phenomena remain largely unchallenged. Cyberpilgrimages are neither physically arduous nor entirely "of the mind", nor do they demand the sincerity or sacrifice usually associated with terrestrial pilgrimage. Consequently, it may be difficult to envisage that levels of holistic absorption and spiritual benefit roughly commensurate with "real" pilgrimage can occur, and as a result, cyberpilgrimage seems "inauthentic". Failure to address this "authenticity issue" is likely to undermine serious engagement with the subject and indeed, with the Internet as a religiously *experiential*, and not just *expressive*, medium.

Literature and Terminology

[5] Despite this, little academic work addresses the issue. As Karaflogka details, Zaleski has explored relationships between religion, spirituality and cyberspace; Wertheim has considered cyberspace as sacred space; Cobb has examined the notion of spiritual life in cyberspace; Erik Davis has studied mystical aspects of information technology; and Heim has explored the metaphysicality of virtual reality.⁵ We can add Stephen O'Leary, who has ably criticised and expanded upon Wertheim's ideas,⁶ Brenda Brasher, author of *Give Me That Online Religion*,⁷ and Karaflogka herself. We can also begin to identify scholars writing specifically on Internet pilgrimage, in particular Mark MacWilliams⁸ and Christopher Helland.⁹ But the authenticity issue remains, and it is this gap that the current article explores.

[6] Reading this article should be prefaced by a couple of hours spent on the Internet, gaining an overview of the diversity of content, design, quality, interactivity, etc., of cyberpilgrimage sites. Be aware though: websites most commonly use the term "virtual pilgrimage"; indeed MacWilliams writes, "'Virtual Pilgrimage' is an Internet neologism for a site on the Net where people can simulate a sacred journey for educational, economic and spiritual purposes."¹⁰ However, the term "virtual pilgrimage" also incorporates non-web-based pilgrimage forms, such as using virtual reality headsets or watching videos, as with Pope Jean Paul II's non-Internet-based pilgrimage to Ur in February 2000.¹¹ I would argue therefore that the term "virtual pilgrimage" is too nebulous, and that "cyberpilgrimage" is more useful and accurate to specify *pilgrimages performed online*. Cyberpilgrimage might best be viewed as *a form of virtual pilgrimage*, itself a form of pilgrimage.

Part II: Authenticity, Presence and Meaning

... we no longer turn to nature to echo our state. Now we catch our reflections, even our spirits, in the movements and mentations of machines.¹²

Physicality and Physicalisation

[7] Clearly, cyberpilgrimage is “not the same as the real thing”,¹³ and although many websites refer to their VR galleries as “virtual pilgrimages,” there is generally no discernible effort to establish equivalence to “real” terrestrial pilgrimage. Indeed, some cyberpilgrimage providers explicitly counter this notion; for example, a community of Franciscan monks state that their “virtual pilgrimage is very limited and in no way pretends to offer what an actual pilgrimage in Italy could offer.”¹⁴ Likewise, for the “Great Jubilee Indulgence” of 2000, in which Catholics travelled to Rome to secure plenary indulgence, the *Catholic Pilgrimage Online* website stated: “conducting an online pilgrimage **does not** fulfill the Indulgence requirements.”¹⁵ This reluctance to imply equivalence to terrestrial pilgrimage suggests a view that experience should be physically grounded to be considered authentic and therefore ratifiable and deserving of similar benefit.

[8] However, the Pope’s own virtual pilgrimage suggests muddier waters and, moreover, stone labyrinths of the European Middle Ages, which substituted for terrestrial pilgrimages to the Holy Land, testify to a long Church tradition of viewing “the pilgrim’s path” as negotiable, allegorical and virtual, but nevertheless deserving of equivalent spiritual benefit. For example:

Chartres Cathedral ... contains ... the “Chemin de Jerusalem” or the Road to Jerusalem. When either the Crusades or poverty made Jerusalem unattainable, pilgrims to Chartres could complete the eleven-circuit labyrinth and have it serve as the spiritual equivalent of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.¹⁶

Such examples are surely useful in terms of establishing precedents for viewing cyberpilgrimage as authentic and credible, but even without such precedents, its invalidity would certainly be challenged by the sheer number and variety of religious communities that offer cyberpilgrimages and claim that these virtual journeys involve meaningful spiritual experiences. One of many sites offering “Virtual Hajj” declares, “If you are not able to go to Hajj, experience the next best thing, the Virtual Hajj.”¹⁷ Similarly, www.cyberfaith.com,¹⁸ aimed at new and potential converts to Catholicism, announces:

Welcome to the land where Jesus walked! I am Abdul Bakr. I am pleased to take you on a virtual pilgrimage of the Temple Mount and the Western Wall, Nazareth, and finally Bethlehem. As we virtually walk the land that Jesus walked, you will visit ... a land rich with history, tradition, and most of all faith!

[9] It is notable that in this “Faith Quest” example we again have a cyberguide, though here “he” is limited to text. In the (newer) Online Labyrinth example, I mentioned that the cyberguide entreats visitors to perform virtual tasks such as clicking-and-dragging votive candles; but “she” also suggests undertaking some activities physically, not just virtually, such as walking in nature or closing one’s eyes. On the Faith Quest website, we find similar remonstrations to *physicalisation*, in particular in a prescription to write prayers to “leave” at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. At www.aish.com¹⁹ (not a cyberpilgrimage site), emailed prayers “will be printed out in the Old City of Jerusalem [and] placed in the Wall by a student of Aish HaTorah.” Is there any reason to suppose that such prayers are less valid than ones placed directly into the Wall by pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem and depositing them there themselves?

Co-location of Spiritual Practice

[10] This impetus to physicalise aspects of spiritual experience is illuminating. Firstly, it does imply a recognition among “cyberpilgrims” and cyberpilgrimage providers that cyberpilgrimages are not authentic in the way terrestrial pilgrimages are, for the reasons discussed. Secondly, it hints at tantalising directions for cyberpilgrimage’s gradual technological sophistication. Already, we are

progressing from text and still photographs to moving images and virtual reality tours with QuickTime panoramas, music, and voiceovers. If rituals such as prayers, meditation, and immolation become increasingly physicalised, cyberpilgrims can combine potentially complex web-based sensory stimuli with real physical actions performed at home, perhaps even simultaneously with each other despite geographical dispersion, to create a much more “holistic,” integrated, and significant experience. Even now, we can see that practices are starting to become not relocated but *co-located* in pilgrims’ homes.

[11] This phenomenon of *co-location* can be seen as a mutualising of spiritual practice between physically separate spaces: i.e., various participants’ homes, or between a cyberpilgrim’s home and a cyberpilgrimage site (if indeed this is “space,” a discussion for elsewhere). Entreating participants to physicalise rituals (etc.) may encourage them to gain or be aware of a *sense* that this phenomenon is occurring, but it is necessary to distinguish that sense from the phenomenon itself: *co-location* is what really occurs, not the abstract sense of its occurrence.

[12] As cyberpilgrimages often mirror terrestrially located counterparts, they may offer particular potential for *co-location* to occur, especially as the realism of their depiction increases; but more broadly, the Internet already enables simpler experiences, such as televised worship, to be “layered” toward this end. As Lin Collette writes:

Some users, such as Kate O’Donnell, rely on online worship to substitute for physical attendance at church services. As a health care worker, her hours often prevent regular visits to churches. She says, “by using online sites, I can read sermons, devotionals, and use chat rooms to fellowship with believers it might be difficult to meet because of my job.”²⁰

Collette adds that O’Donnell “says that someday her schedule will permit her to join a church and attend regularly but for now ‘this helps me on my journey’.” We can observe the important co-locating function of her cyber-religious practices, which enables her (and others) to read sermons and devotionals, perhaps simultaneously with each other, despite geographical dispersion.

[13] In such cases, actual co-location is confined to shared acts of reading, singing, and directed praying, rather minimising its potential impact. Its presence is of course magnified however, by encouragement of the *sense* that co-location is occurring. As Campbell writes:

... accounts of online pilgrimages highlight issues of spiritual experience, interaction and connection. In each case, individuals are able to virtually visit and engage with an event, location or group of people they normally would be unable to attend in a real-world setting. The Internet enables pilgrims not just to view a sacred space, but to interact with it and others who are participating. A commonality is the sense of connection pilgrims articulate, not just to the place or event, but to God through these encounters. Pilgrimage online facilitates unique spiritual engagement in the contemporary context.²¹

There are overtones of Turner’s *communitas* theory, but for now it is sufficient to note that cyberpilgrimages are potentially well positioned to evoke a sense of *co-location*, because of what they are: virtually experiential *representations* of phenomena usually considered to be physically bound as well as communal. However, as virtual “experience” is technologically driven, and as we can predict neither the form nor the uptake of new technologies, it would be premature to conclude much more regarding co-location. Furthermore, cyberpilgrimages do not always evoke, or attempt to evoke, much of a sense of co-location, implying the possibility that other experiential goals for cyberpilgrimages may exist and be explored. Nevertheless, establishing co-location as a key concept relating to cyberpilgrimage is useful in terms of clarifying something of cyberpilgrimage’s

relationship to physicality, and attempting to develop a meaningful vocabulary for discussing it.

Benefits and Complementarity

[14] Of additional interest is that Campbell's overview, above, hints at benefits of cyberpilgrimage that terrestrial pilgrimage organisers might find difficult to emulate. First, cyberpilgrimage makes pilgrimage sites available "twenty-four-seven," including for people unable to meet the physical challenges terrestrial pilgrimage can entail. No special time off is required, and it therefore serves as a *continuously available* connection to broader faith communities and to the ancient, communal landscapes and architectures of those traditions. Second, because cyberpilgrimages are not usually religiously exclusive, they can open channels for interfaith exploration. Third, barring purchase of an Internet-capable PC and connection fees, cyberpilgrimage is free, whereas terrestrial pilgrimage can involve massive expense. Fourth, cyberpilgrimages can place "pilgrims" in greater visual proximity to shrines, artwork, sacred artifacts, and so on, for longer, allowing closer, unhurried scrutiny and contemplation. Fifth, there are safety considerations. In the 1998 "Stoning of the Pillars" ceremony, part of the Islamic *hajj*, 119 pilgrims died. In 2004, 244 died. In 2006, the figure was "at least 345," the highest total in only sixteen years.²² Such considerations may lead to serious examination of cyberpilgrimage as a complementary (*not* a substitutionary) form of pilgrimage, offering greater physical and temporal access and lower risks, something likely to appeal to relevant organisational bodies and to many, though probably not all, pilgrims.

[15] This notion of complementarity between terrestrial and non-terrestrial pilgrimage recalls Morinis' suggestion that:

It is ... questionable to distinguish between terrestrial and "metaphorical" pilgrimages. The distinction portrays the earthly journey as somehow more real, when, in fact, most cultures subsume physical journeys and other quests into one more inclusive category: the spiritual life is a pilgrimage.²³

Cyberpilgrimage "journeys" can be viewed as "metaphorical" in their relationship to physical reality and in their reliance upon movement/place metaphors. To an extent, they also reflect subsumption of that terrestrial, physical dimension, facilitating spiritual journeys and "spiritual life" within "ordinary" time. Thus, though not intrinsic to the wider pilgrimage phenomenon, cyberpilgrimage exemplifies a *type* of pilgrimage intrinsic to that phenomenon. It seems reasonable to view it both as a subcategory and as a lived, contemporary, experiential *component* of that broader pilgrimage tradition, with which it may yet achieve a meaningful relationship of complementarity.

Tradition Preservation and Transmission

[16] We turn now to cyberpilgrimage's Internet presence, with the aim of establishing some purposes and functions. I begin by exploring the usefulness of the Internet in preserving and transmitting tradition, then consider ideas concerning cyberpilgrimage in the context of Turnerian notions of liminality and *communitas*. As should become clear, cyberpilgrimages do, in various ways, reflect the real-life pilgrimage phenomena with which they are associated, but pose serious challenges to theories surrounding those phenomena and provoke compelling questions regarding future directions.

[17] Mark MacWilliams asserts:

Virtual pilgrimages on the Internet are important for understanding new ways of being spiritual in the postmodern world. Whether strictly for informational purposes or for something more, these pilgrimages draw upon the symbolic relations of equivalence

between their cyberspace sites and real-life sacred ones.²⁴

These “symbolic relations of equivalence” are critical in reassuring interested newcomers and those already steeped in a particular faith tradition that an Internet community is well-structured, cohesive, and even unchallenging to orthodox representations. Because cyberpilgrimages are derivative, they reproduce “electronically ... the same mythical *imaginaire* that is architecturalized *in situ* in the “real” pilgrimages,”²⁵ which acts to facilitate transmission of traditional “knowledge” regarding pilgrimage practices and meanings on various levels.

[18] Thus, many cyberpilgrimage websites are characterised not only by symbolic, iconographic or linguistic conservatism but by ritual and archaeological conservatism, meaning that they tend not to construct *new* religious landscapes but instead to parallel to varying degrees pilgrimage sites that exist in the “real” world. The Croagh Patrick cyberpilgrimage studied by MacWilliams,²⁶ for example, attempts literal step-by-step reconstruction of the physical pilgrimage, through QuickTime panoramas, video footage, and sound recordings of wind and trudging feet, though the result is nevertheless a sensory and temporal abridgment of the physical experience. Many cyberpilgrimage providers layer additional, conservative material over the basic structure, including tradition-specific music, text explaining or enhancing imagery, and iconographic cursor “hotspots,” such as crosses or mandalas revealing extra information. In this way, “normal” sacred space, although it is often abridged, is nevertheless reconstructed and embellished.

[19] Where pilgrims’ purposes are concerned, conservatism and radicalism are more difficult to establish. First, cyberpilgrims have diverse motives and intentions, ranging from indulgence of idle curiosity through to preparation, supplementation, or even substitution, for terrestrial pilgrimage. Second, the attempt to discern these motives and intentions is complicated by the potential for flexibility of self-identity on the Internet,²⁷ and by the Internet’s relative anonymity. Many websites do provide “guestbooks” for participants to record thoughts and responses, but contributors are self-selected, and in any case not all websites make guestbooks publically available. Additionally, contributors often use public guestbooks to applaud website creators, rather than to explain why they visited that site. However, this ought not to prohibit exploration, and it may be possible for researchers to utilise website “bulletin boards” to advertise for potential informants or to request more detailed personal accounts.

[20] Whatever those purposes, though, such complications underline that cyberspace is not *only* a reconstructed extension of “normal” space. It is *also* an imaginative mutation of that space, in which social aspects are, and for now must be, amplified, so that, as Helland writes:

In reality, when people use the web for religious purposes, they are doing it in a created and engineered environment ... Unlike the offline world, where natural forces impinge upon the social realm, in cyberspace social construction is absolute and palpable.²⁸

However, the physical absence of humans from these constructed social environments is important and, therefore, adaptation is as key as conservatism. As Brasher stresses:

Cyberspace ... can unite many more people than normal physical space, but you need to adapt the ritual so that participants can sense the energy and feel part of the ritual as if they were there in person. If the ritual isn’t adapted for cyberspace, participants will feel like they’re sitting in their living rooms reading a ritual onscreen instead of as if they’re plugged into cyberspace raising energy and worshipping as a group.²⁹

Intriguing here is Brasher’s suggestion that participants must not feel as though they are where their bodies are, “in their living rooms, reading a ritual onscreen,” but as though they are “plugged

into cyberspace,” at one with the machine. This idea has profound connotations, some of which I shall touch upon shortly. It is sufficient to note for now that (re)constructing convincing depths of tradition-preserving symbology, text, metaphor, etc., helps to create vital and authentic-seeming contexts in which tradition-transmission can occur, and that sensitive adaptation can also generate the sense that one actually is, and belongs, “there in person,” participating in a real community in a spiritually meaningful *place*.

Liminality and Degrees of Otherness

[21] When we consider that human groups routinely construct temples and other sacred spaces that are considered “genuine” in the physical world, the idea that spiritually meaningful places might exist, or be laid claim to, in the constructed environment of cyberspace is perhaps not as challenging as it appears. As Brasher writes:

Online religion represents the early effort of a rapidly computerized humanity to spiritualize a novel habitus. Like mounting a mezuzah on the doorpost or a crucifix in the living room of a new abode, online religion classifies cyberspace as a valued and value-producing home.³⁰

The location of this “home” within a *type* of space so qualitatively different from the mundane space usually suggested by the word implies a recontextualisation of “ordinary” structures, and poses irresistibly the question of whether cyberpilgrimage might reflect Turner’s theory of pilgrimage as a liminoid phenomenon. According to that theory, pilgrimage temporarily removes pilgrims from “normal” spatial, temporal, and social structures, secluding and immersing them within a liminal state of (sacred) “otherness.” Pilgrims then return, to reintegrate into “normality,” having undergone some form of existential transformation.

[22] MacWilliams writes that Turner viewed film as “the dominant form of public liminality in electronically advanced societies,”³¹ adding that “Since Turner’s time, computer-mediated communication has replaced movies as the newest technological medium for experiencing liminality.”³² He notes that the Croagh Patrick cyberpilgrimage he studied reflects the tripartite structure of liminoid theory (crudely, “getting there,” “being there” and “coming back”). The “Online Labyrinth” is less heavily reconstructive of its “original” pilgrimage site, but we do find the tripartite structure, this time declared explicitly. We also find attempts to evoke a sense of liminal, “other” *space*, for example through the claim that “This is holy space ... This is your space to be with God and God’s space to be with you.” This affirmation occurs in the central “station” entitled “Holy Space,” corresponding structurally to the liminal stage, and identified as “Illumination (receiving)” on the Grace Cathedral website. The previous five stations, “Inward Journey,” “Noise,” “Letting Go,” “Hurts” and “Distractions,” correspond to a gradual “stripping away” of psychological preoccupations and crutches; and the subsequent five, “Outward Journey,” “Self,” “The Planet,” “Others,” and a reflective section, “Impressions,” correspond to a post-liminal, reintegrative phase.

[23] This designer’s technological expertise, coupled with his/her evident intention of generating a peaceful, pilgrimage-*reflecting* (but not pilgrimage-*cloning*) environment of meditative personal transformation, results in a heady sensory brew that is difficult to resist, and that does give the impression of being secluded and immersed within a state of respectful otherness. *However*, because a few cyberpilgrimages mirror aspects of Turner’s theory of pilgrimage as a liminoid phenomenon, does *not* mean it provides an adequate framework for understanding cyberpilgrimage generally: some cyberpilgrimages consist of little more than photographic galleries or unabsorbing “informational” texts. Certainly a spatial, temporal and social “otherness” exists, but in cyberpilgrimage’s case, it is in probably immeasurable “degrees”, which places it outside (largely

dualistic) Turnerian frameworks.

Communitas and Technology

[24] Of course, merely commenting that such “degrees of otherness” are “probably immeasurable” is rather unhelpful, but no more so than attempting to frame such distinctions: firstly because the rapidity of PC technological development would outstrip attempts to maintain and update such frameworks, and secondly because such an exercise would be so fantastically subjective. Thus Turnerian liminoid theory, though not irrelevant, is not particularly useful in understanding cyberpilgrimage, suggesting that new theories will be needed. So let us consider Turner’s ideas concerning the experience of *communitas*, the shared, sensed bond of communality and commonality that develops among pilgrims as, collectively, mundane structures, personal statuses and identities are eroded during the course of pilgrimage.

[25] At first glance, the lack of potential for *communitas* in cyberpilgrimage seems glaringly obvious: at least currently, cyberpilgrimage is a solitary undertaking that can appear intrinsically embroiled in what Goldenberg calls “a process of making one another disappear by living more and more of our lives apart from other humans, in the company of machines.”³³ However, as MacWilliams asserts:

A degree of virtual *communitas* does form inside the guestbook of Croagh Patrick. In the non-place of cyberspace, just as in real, physical space, “communities of meaning” unite over sets of symbols and texts ... [W]riting in the book and reading what others have said creates a web of personal relationships.³⁴

Provision of guestbooks, community forums, bulletin boards, and chat rooms enables virtual interaction, thereby suggesting that one has entered into an important, value-sharing network inhabited by *real people*, with whom some sense of “togetherness” and commonality is intimated automatically, and with whom a sense of communality may occur through *co-location*, as discussed. Thus, though it may be difficult to compare degrees to which feelings of *communitas* are evoked between on the one hand cyberpilgrims, and on the other, terrestrial pilgrims, it nevertheless seems that cyberpilgrimage can create bonds between real people.

[26] MacWilliams, however, suggests:

Rather than *communitas*, CMC [computer mediated communication] often reinforces a monadic individualism since ... all [pilgrims] have before them are letters in a guestbook. Their inter-connectedness therefore is limited by the technology that binds them together, mainly textually.³⁵

How far these technological limitations will persist is unclear, however. There are numerous well-developed, non-textual, Internet technologies yet to be explored by most cyberpilgrimage providers, even as webcams, “surround-sound” and peer-to-peer Internet telephony networks such as Skype, gain in popularity among home PC users. The recently released Nintendo *Wii* features three-dimensional, motion-detecting technology and is proving highly saleable; and, illustrating a more extreme means of *co-location*, so-called “telepresence technologies” now exist that feed the user’s senses “with such stimuli as to give the feeling of being in [an]other location, through computer-linked gloves and hats, for example. Additionally, user(s) may be given the ability to affect the remote location,”³⁶ such as in “remote surgery.” The Transparent Telepresence Research Group, which specialises in developing this technology for various industries, explains on its website:

We define Transparent Telepresence as the experience of being fully present at a live real world location remote from one's own *physical* location. Someone experiencing transparent telepresence would therefore be able to behave, and receive stimuli, as though at the remote site.³⁷

[27] A future in which human experiences are navigable by means of telepresence technologies may seem far-fetched to some, horrifying or exciting to others, and in any case such technologies might prove ill-suited to generating *co-location* of a spiritual sort; but this is uncertain. One can imagine their use in baptism ceremonies, for example, so that the person being baptised virtually actually *feels* the priest's touch on his or her forehead. Ultimately, limitation may be a matter of imagination rather than technology, possibly even culminating in situations in which "the authentic, when found ... seem[s] rather dowdy and indeed compare[s] unfavourably with the sophisticated experiences that can be created."³⁸

[28] Whether or not *co-location* reaches such levels, and leaving aside individual feelings regarding the "healthiness" and validity of such experiences, Rushkoff is in my view right to assert:

I do believe we are in the midst of a transition—intimated by the Internet—towards a more collective thinking, where the individual psyche becomes a component of a larger group mind. This doesn't mean we stop existing as individuals, but it could mean we become more fully aware of every other living being, much in the way a coral reef's individual organisms respond to one another as if they were part of the same, single body.³⁹

This is an intriguing possibility, and it will be interesting to see how Internet religion influences and is influenced by it. With such fluid notions of individuality, collectivity and egalitarianism kindled and reflected in the online experience, however, it is difficult to see how Turner's highly structural theory of *communitas* might usefully be applied to cyberpilgrimage.

A New Medium of Religious Experience

[29] So, if we must look beyond Turner, what of Morinis and his insistence upon the centrality of imaginative transformation in pilgrimage? Certainly, that seems more pertinent to cyberpilgrimage, and in contextualising non-physical experience generally. In the cyberpilgrimage context, "imaginative transformation" relies to a large degree upon what MacWilliams calls "[t]he power of computer-mediated communication to create a kind of "total sensorium" of sight, sound, and even virtual touch."⁴⁰ This "total sensorium" may be technologically distant, but already many cyberpilgrims describe their cyber-"journeys" in "spiritually" transformative terms.

[30] Of course, the concept of spiritual transformation through metaphorical journeys does not originate with Morinis. Many faith traditions refer to a "Path" or "Way," a metaphysical or moral route of sorts that must be navigated in order to attain enlightenment, salvation, peace of mind, and so on; and in many ways terrestrial pilgrimage is viewed as a tangible physical interpretation of that journey, which thereby acts to link the physical and metaphysical. Beyond physicalisation of activities already noted, such as emailing prayers, and the small real-life movements of computer users tapping keys or moving the mouse, there is little of "the physical" about cyberpilgrimage (at least until those "telepresence technologies" catch on); so this notion initially appears irrelevant. Our "Online Labyrinth" website suggests another possibility, however, which is that the Internet merely mediates that link.

[31] In that example, the language, imagery and music employed are designed to affect the experient's mood and receptivity and to focus attention: for example, whatever else occurs on-

screen, each page contains the image of a horizontal stream of particles, continually and steadily emanating from one “source.” This simple image, meaningful and mesmerising, pulls the “pilgrim” imaginatively out of his or her chair and into an intricately designed environment of implied enrichment, even whilst the physical body remains bound within the “real” world. Thus, provided we avoid dualistic Cartesian mind-body separatism, cyberpilgrimage can offer virtual interpretations of those same metaphysical and moral routeways, and *can* serve to link the metaphysical, in the form of whatever is “revealed” or “experienced” spiritually, with the physical, in the real-life body of the participant. It is just that the Internet, rather than a physical pathway, acts to mediate that experience.

[32] Arthur writes, “every expression of human religiousness is, inevitably, a *mediated* expression which comes to us through a variety of means of communication: words, symbols, music, architecture, and so on.”⁴¹ Religious expressions in cyberspace are no different and, considered in this way, cyberpilgrimage can be seen to possess the potential to facilitate genuine “mystical” experience, depending upon individual proclivity and motivations. As Helland points out:

It is essential to recognise that the Internet is different things to different people. Individuals use this technology in various ways, and the manner in which they utilise the medium is based upon what they believe the Internet is and can be used for.⁴²

In other words, if a PC user believes the Internet can be utilised for religious and spiritual ends, then it can.

[33] In sum, we should remember that pilgrims often emphasise the metaphorical, rather than the physical, aspects of pilgrimage. Also, in common with other online “providers” of religious activity, cyberpilgrimage providers often attempt to physicalise certain aspects of the experience(s) they offer, and such attempts can only grow in sophistication. This *physicalisation* helps to foster the sense of co-location so crucial to the growing “success” of online religion generally, and, in its role as a facilitating medium of imaginative religious “journeying” also helps to link the physical with the metaphysical, as does terrestrial pilgrimage. Like terrestrial pilgrimage, cyberpilgrimage can be viewed as playing a contemporary and consequential role within pilgrimage broadly, and also as an authentic “subcategory” of that phenomenon.

Part III: Sacredness and Conclusions

Cyberspace is suffused with religious content ... It presents new opportunities and challenges for all aspects of the study of religion ... Moreover, the Internet as a medium bears unique features that may well alter the global context of religiosity in which the academic study of religion operates. In intended and unintended ways a media revolution is well underway that is likely to change the face of religion by changing the social context in which religion happens.⁴³

Cybersacredness and Illusion

[34] Before concluding, I would like to consider briefly some ideas regarding cybersacredness and illusion, as it seems that cyberpilgrimage derives at least some security from the notion that sacredness might be “accessible” online. Refuting this notion, Rossi writes:

The Sacred exists. The technology that produces “cyberspace” exists. The fact that it is possible to use cyberspace technology to communicate spiritual ideas and principles or to create so-called “sacred spaces” in cyberspace does not justify calling these possibilities the cyber-sacred ... The Sacred is essentially communion with God. The Sacred is ... only known and experienced in an I-Thou relationship. What

lies beyond that can neither be known nor conceived nor communicated except in negative terms ... What can be said definitively is that the language and logic and legerdemain of technology are left far behind, transcended totally.⁴⁴

Leaving aside the theistic assumptions that are apparent here, which are nevertheless relevant given that the Internet is a global phenomenon, Rossi is making at least two noteworthy errors: Firstly, he confuses the experience of “the Sacred” with the mediums and spaces through which it may be experienced. An individual might experience “the Sacred” while staring into the washing-up, but this does not mean that the washing-up bowl is sacred (or that it is not). As Hammerman asks, “Does a God who is everywhere really reside more in those precincts that humans declare to be sacred?” He answers himself: “God is in this machine too ... God is wherever people let God in.”⁴⁵ Equally, the Internet can *mediate* the link between “the Sacred” and the individual perceiving it, but this mediatory ability does not imply that the technology itself is being viewed as Holy. Secondly, to say that the “Sacred” must necessarily leave behind, indeed “transcend totally,” “the language and logic and legerdemain of technology,” at best repeats the first flaw, but at worst (if we view “technology” broadly to include, for example, literature and architecture) would be unwelcome news to most faith traditions, for whom an array of books and buildings are invested with sacredness.

[35] The key is that although cyberspace is comprised of physical technology, cyberspace and physical technology are *not* synonymous. The former is broader in scope than the latter, and it exists as a sort of transitional, cognitive space, bound technologically but nevertheless transcending physical technology, just as the mind is bound physically but not conceptually within the body. Rossi fears that we will not understand the “cyber-realm” is illusory, that it is “maya in its subtlest and most beguiling form,”⁴⁶ and Brasher notes:

... an odd similarity between what religious people expect of their relationship with the divine and what computer users expect of cyberspace ... always available, always listening, and always responsive, no matter how many people are dancing around.⁴⁷

To my mind, the cognitive space of the Internet is less subtle and beguiling than *maya* as that concept is usually understood. Despite its great proclivity for absorbing our attention, I nevertheless believe most Internet users are aware on some persistent level that they are exploring constructed spaces. Admittedly, if facilitators of Internet “religious experience” are pursuing a golden fleece of “total sensorium,” subtlety and beguilement might increase, but there would surely have to be momentous technological and ethical shifts for Internet activities and experiences to become *more* subtle and *more* beguiling than the illusion of the “real” world that the concept of *maya* proposes.

Conclusions and Directions

[36] For many, the principal difficulty with cyberpilgrimage may lie more with staving off dystopian fears about the dehumanising effects of technology, as Rossi expresses, than with relatively straightforward concerns about (lack of) movement. True, cyberpilgrimage’s disengagement from physical, embodied action seems bizarre initially, even the word “cyberpilgrimage” seems oxymoronic; yet closer scrutiny suggests more complex relationships with (and within) broader pilgrimage traditions. So, what does this mean for religion and for Religious Studies?

[37] Clearly, cyberpilgrimage poses a challenge to stereotypes associated with pilgrimage phenomena, as well as with the nature of experience, sacredness, place and reality. It is of course firmly “of its time,” and thus reflects much concerning the meaning of “the divine” in an increasingly pluralist and media-saturated “world culture” (use of the singular here is not to imply

homogeneity), or at least among its technologically mobilised populations. For that reason, let alone for its provocative and stimulating characteristics, it deserves study. In an age in which interfaith engagement continually challenges individually cherished ideas, and in which air travel and space exploration have demonstrated there is no anthropomorphic God languishing just above the clouds, the utterly communal and yet supremely individual, amorphous breadth of cyberspace may be reassuring for many, and what's more it is traversable on one's own terms and in one's own time. It can thus allow one to transcend, or at least to feel as though one is transcending, the "usual" exclusivities attached to sites or rituals because of political instability, religious differences, and so on. As Hammerman writes:

They let God in[to Mecca], but they would never let me in. As a Jew, I'd have a tough time getting into the entire country of Saudi Arabia, much less making it to Islam's most sacred city. But with the Internet, it's a breeze to get past the guards.⁴⁸

This degree of personal spiritual authority, teamed with notions of the Internet as a communally empowering medium, may be compelling in making such experiences feel meaningful both personally and collectively, constructing what Brasher calls a "techno-maintained spirituality"⁴⁹ that feels utterly authentic.

[38] Certainly, that might be a fruitful area for research, but this piece has been about laying foundations. I have suggested that cyberpilgrimage is a complex and meaningful phenomenon, and, furthermore, that it can occupy a credible position within the diverse and developing tradition of pilgrimage. There is much I have been unable to discuss, for example regarding the implications of hypertextuality,⁵⁰ the relationship between vision and experience, as well as an intriguing question, posed by Pfeiffer: "Is cyberspace really "space" at all, or is it simply another view of time?"⁵¹ But I reiterate: cyberpilgrimages are new phenomena; and this "newness" both stymies attempts to predict the degree to which technologisation may alter perceptions of how "spiritual benefit" occurs or is ratifiable, and also raises exciting possibilities for researchers: from elucidating cyberpilgrimage-specific typologies from participant accounts, to analyses of the responses of faith groups to increasing representation, including self-representation, in cyberspace, to analysing the relationship between meaning and media.

[39] Particularly fascinating might be exploration of parallels between cyberpilgrimage and meditation, and the potential to build new frameworks of understanding from this perspective; but the possibilities at this stage are cornucopian. Cyberpilgrimage can undoubtedly offer much, both to participants in online religious "experiences" and to studies of religion and pilgrimage. Moreover, as improved technologies and increased emphasis upon physicalisation of ritual culminates in ever greater senses of what I have called co-location, cyberpilgrimage is likely to become increasingly important. It is unlikely to "replace" either the practice or the notion of terrestrial pilgrimage as "real" pilgrimage: indeed, if cyberpilgrimage becomes popular (and, especially, ratified) then terrestrial pilgrimage is likely to gain in kudos. As Coleman and Crang learned from studying tourism, "The differentiation of those who "really" know places is surely still part of a game of authenticity."⁵² Whatever happens, there are people already participating in this "media revolution,"⁵³ embracing new modes of "religious" self- and community-expression that are liable to transform "religion" for everyone, and uprooting many of our ideas about sacred place, sacred movement and sacred journey.

Notes

¹Malise Ruthven, *Islam: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 65.

²www.yfc.co.uk/labyrinth/online.html. Accessed October 10, 2007.

³Naomi Goldenberg, *Resurrecting the Body: Feminism, Religion and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 17.

⁴Alan Morinis. "Introduction: The Territory of the Anthropology of Pilgrimage," *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, ed. A. Morinis (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press; 1992), 17.

⁵Anastasia Karaflogka, "Religious Discourse and Cyberspace," *Religion: An International Journal* 32 (2002): 279.

⁶Stephen O'Leary. "Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks," *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, eds. Lorne Dawson and Douglas Cowan, 37-58 (New York/London: Routledge, 2004).

⁷Brenda Brasher, *Give Me That Online Religion* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

⁸Mark MacWilliams, "Virtual Pilgrimages on the Internet," *Religion: An International Journal* 32 (2002): 315-36 (Symposium lead-author); "Virtual Pilgrimage to Ireland's Croagh Patrick" in *Religion Online*, eds Dawson and Cowan, 223-237.

⁹Christopher Helland, "Turning Cyberspace into Sacred Space" (2007)

video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-6186132236261787419&dq=type%3Agoogle+engEDU. See also his "Diaspora on the Electronic Frontier: Developing Virtual Connections with Sacred Homelands," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12,3 (2007),

jcmc.indiana.edu/vol12/issue3/helland.html ; and "Popular Religion and the World Wide Web: A Match Made in (Cyber) Heaven," *Religion Online*, eds. Dawson and Cowan, 23-36.

¹⁰MacWilliams, "Virtual Pilgrimages," 316-7.

¹¹"Pope Makes Virtual Iraq Trip,"

www.earthchangestv.com/breaking/February2000/0223pope.htm , accessed April 2, 2006.

¹²Erik Davis. "The Spiritual Cyborg," *Religion Online and Techno-Spiritualism* 7 (1999), www.cybersociology.com/files/7_erikdavis.html.html , accessed March 17, 2007.

¹³MacWilliams, "Virtual Pilgrimages," 326.

¹⁴Bret Thoman, "Virtual Pilgrimage to the Land of St Francis in Umbria, Tuscany, Rieti, and the Marches, Italy," www.stfrancispilgrimages.com/index_files/VirtualPilgrimage.pdf , accessed June 20, 2006.

¹⁵<http://www.catholicpilgrimage.faithweb.com/frames.html>, accessed March 31, 2007. Summary of Papal Bull via <http://www.ewtn.com/jubilee/indulgence/index.htm> , Accessed March 18, 2007.

¹⁶Ronald Lukens-Bull and Mark Fafard, "(Re)Creating Israel in Christian Zionism," *Journal of Religion and Society*, 9,34 (2007), moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2007/2007-16.html , accessed September 12, 2007.

¹⁷"The Hajj," www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/H/hajj/index.html , accessed August 7, 2007.

¹⁸www.cyberfaith.com/weblinks/landjesuswalked2.html , accessed August 14, 2009.

¹⁹www.aish.com/wallcam/Place_a_Note_in_the_Wall.asp , accessed August 14, 2009.

²⁰Lin Collette, "Cyberspace: The New Frontier for Religion," *Cybersociology Magazine: Religion Online/Techno-Spiritualism Issue 7* (1999), www.socio.demon.co.uk/magazine/7/lin.html , accessed March 20, 2006.

²¹Heidi Campbell, "A New Forum for Religion: Spiritual Pilgrimage Online," www.biblesociety.org.uk/exploratory/articles/campbell01.pdf , accessed March 20, 2007.

²²news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4606002.stm (Accessed 20/03/07).

²³Cited MacWilliams, "Virtual Pilgrimages", 320.

²⁴MacWilliams, "Virtual Pilgrimage," 224.

²⁵MacWilliams, "Virtual Pilgrimage," 227.

²⁶Via <http://www.croagh-patrick.com/mountain.html> .

²⁷Sherry Turkle, cited in H. Berger and D. Ezzy, "The Internet as Virtual Spiritual Community: Teen Witches in the United States and Australia," Dawson and Cowan, eds., 175-88.

²⁸Christopher Helland, "Surfing for Salvation," *Religion* 32 (2000): 293.

²⁹Brasher, 88.

³⁰Brasher, 142.

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- ³¹MacWilliams, "Virtual Pilgrimage," 233, citing D. Tomas, "Old Rituals for New Space: Rites de Passage and William Gibson's Cultural Model of Cyberspace," *Cyberspace: First Steps*, M. Benedikt, ed (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 34.
- ³²MacWilliams, "Virtual Pilgrimage," 233.
- ³³Goldenberg, 11.
- ³⁴MacWilliams, "Virtual Pilgrimage," 235.
- ³⁵MacWilliams, "Virtual Pilgrimages on the Internet," 327-8.
- ³⁶Via <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Telepresence> , accessed March 20, 2007.
- ³⁷<http://telepresence.dmem.strath.ac.uk/telepresence.htm> , March 20, 2007.
- ³⁸Coleman and Crang, 4, discussing tourism and its representation of (usually past-time) "realities."
- ³⁹Douglas Rushkoff, citing Jeremy S. Gluck, "Techno-Spiritual Quotes" via http://www.cybersociology.com/files/7_gluck.html , accessed June 20, 2006.
- ⁴⁰MacWilliams, "Virtual Pilgrimage," 230-1.
- ⁴¹Chris Arthur, ed., *Religion and the Media: An Introductory Reader* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1993), 1.
- ⁴²Helland, 294.
- ⁴³Lorne Dawson, "Cyberspace and Religious Life: Conceptualizing the Concerns and Consequences," *CESNUR* (2001), www.cesnur.org/2001/london2001/dawson.htm , accessed March 21, 2007.
- ⁴⁴Francis Rossi, "Dialogue on the Cyber-Sacred and the Relationship between Technological and Spiritual Development," 1999. Via <http://www.socio.demon.co.uk/magazine/7/rossi.html> , accessed March 20, 2007.
- ⁴⁵Hammerman, 16-7.
- ⁴⁶Rossi n. 47.
- ⁴⁷Brasher, 186.
- ⁴⁸Hammerman, 35.
- ⁴⁹Brasher, 155.
- ⁵⁰Dawson and Cowan, 10, offer a brief introduction to this subject.
- ⁵¹W.M.Pfeiffer, "Cyberspace and Time," 1998. Via: www.monarchbreeze.com/views6_cyberspace_and_time.html, accessed March 18, 2007.
- ⁵²Coleman and Crang, 9.
- ⁵³Dawson, n. 41.

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