media/rep/

Repositorium für die Medienwissenschaft

DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

Philipps Universität Marburg

Google A Religion

Expanding Notions of Religion Online

Joanna Sleigh

GOOGLE A RELIGION

Google is more than just a search engine. The online Oxford English Dictionary (2016) defines Google as an intransitive verb: "To use the Google search engine to find information on the internet." This is an oversimplification as today Google is a company offering products and services beyond search that are geared towards an individual's needs. From *Google Maps, Google Scholar, Google Drive, Google Translate, Gmail, Google News, Google Earth, YouTube*, to the browser *Chrome*, as well as the mobile and computer devices themselves, Google is effectively breaching the gap between the real world (RW) and virtual world (VW) by integrating itself into the daily lives of internet users. Given this ubiquity it is not surprising that Google has become engaged in the realm of religion. What I am referring to is Googlism, *The Church of Google*, an online community, not officially associated with Google, that believes "Google is the closest thing to a god that can be scientifically proven" (MacPherson 2016).

Before delving into questions of whether or not Googlism is a religion, it is important to acknowledge the internet has changed the way spirituality and religion are approached. In a general sense, religion traditionally signified the various ways humans negotiated their relationship with the transcendent, alone or in communities. Durkheim, in his definition of religion, purports that the systems of symbols, beliefs and practices relating to the transcendent unites adherents in a moral community (2005: 40, 46). Similarly, the general anthropological conceptualization of religion is effectively a 'social institution' of more or less geographically bounded social contexts (see Segal 2000 and Morris 1987). However, the online realm of the internet is a place void of overarching social structures or obvious social ties. These traditional pre-modern religious ideas about the world consequently clash with the post-modern world view, which is heavily influenced by social change, detachment, fluid identities and 'play.' It is this collision between notions of serious religiosity and that of

playful satire that I am interested in. For it is this clash that I experienced in my research. Members of *The Church of Google* that I spoke to either were firm believers in the spirituality mediated by technology or approached the concept as humorous and 'deeply playful.' So what does religion now mean in the online world? What is a satirical religion? What are motivations for engaging with cyber religions? These are the key questions I intend to investigate using the case study of *The Church of Google*.

APPROACHING RELIGIOSITY IN *THE CHURCH OF GOOGLE*[1]

The Church of Google, a website founded in 2011 by Matt MacPherson, is primarily an online platform that unites a network of people in spiritual practice and discussions. This fits the general description of a 'digital religion,' a term used in current scholarship relating to the technological and cultural space evoked in discussions about how online and offline religious spheres have become integrated (Campbell 2012). Notably, this term has evolved from concepts of 'cyber-religion' which emerged in the mid 1990s with the initiation of academic study of religious engagement with the internet (Hojsgaard 2005). "Cyber religion" in a more general sense described any religion mediated by the internet. Brenda Brasher (2001: 29) states "Cyber religion refers to the presence of religious organizations and religious activities in cyberspace." However other analysts such as Lorne L. Dawson (2000: 29) used the term more specifically, stating that cyber religions are "religious organizations and groups that exist only in cyberspace." While Brasher's definition was all encompassing, Dawson's interpretation was problematic in that it was founded on the epistemologically questionable conjecture that religions have an existence independent of human existence. A presupposition which ignores the fact that all online activity is mediated by real life - it takes somebody to press the power button, to set up a program, to design a website, to connect the server and to moderate. Brasher (2001:30) affirms that to date there is no genuine example of a religion that has been established without at least some initial human interference. Helland (2000) offered another conceptual framework, proposing there be two categories 'online religion' and 'religion online' to distinguish differences between the formation of new forms of religiosity in general from religions that used the internet as a new social landscape for practicing spirituality.

---

1 | Research for this essay was conducted via interviews across a variety of platforms (*Gmail*, *Skype*, *Facebook*, thechurchofgoogle.org and *Reddit*) from the 1.12.15 to the 22.3.16. The main focus was participant observation, interviews, participatory action research and reflexivity.

Helland (2007) has more recently critiqued these terms for they too have become increasingly blurred distinguishing signifiers. Embracing the aforementioned terminological complexities within academic scholarship is the term 'Digital Religion,' a term that acknowledges the internet has become a spiritual forging point between real life & virtual reality, a place fostering and possibly forming religious content and activities. Echoing Campbell (2012) I thus use this term to describe the technological and cultural space referred to in discussions of the integration and blending of offline and online religions.

Image 1

The Church of Google's Reddit Community. Accessed: March 22, 2016. www.reddit.com/r/churchofgoogle/

In an era marked by information saturation and social media, it is only natural that religious self-expression and representation online has become an accepted aspect of religious practice and identity. Leveraging the advantages of social media is *The Church of Google* whose members are spread across a diversity of social platforms. The two most prominent are (1) *Facebook* with

636 commenters[2] and (2) *Reddit* with 462 readers.[3] On the home page the *Facebook* plugin is placed below the main body text and is titled in red 'Join the debate below:' inviting visitors on the site to engage in discussion. In the bottom right hand corner of the page is then the hyperlink to the *Reddit* platform, (see Figure 1). This hyperlink takes the form of an an angel icon with the words 'Join us on reddit' hovering above and painted in Google's signature colors. With two platforms of social exchange that promote openness and interaction, it is logical that there is a colorful plethora of commentators and comments. As Horsfield observes, digital media has "increased the potential for a diversity of voices" (2012: 255). This can be attributed to the form of the platforms themselves. *Reddit* functions via an up vote and down vote system, while *Facebook* posts are more of a broadcasting of ideas to networks. Likewise, the post types differentiate accordingly to the platform, *Facebook* posts are more public affirmations of individualistic perspectives while *Reddit* posts are more focused on getting a response from the community. These differences between platforms should not be overlooked.

---

2 | Note, it is difficult to estimate how many commentators there are on *The Church of Google*'s website because of the nature of the platforms being used. While the website counts 633 comment threads, this statistic does not take into consideration the number of people who comment within a thread.

3 | Interestingly, in my research there were very few people who were active on both *Reddit* and *Facebook*. This suggests that the community of *The Church of Google* is larger than it may at first seem.

Image 2

Activity on *The Church of Google's Reddit* platform. Accessed: March 22, 2016.
https://www.reddit.com/r/churchofgoogle/comments/45wlfc/googlism_should_
be_about_ordering_all_religions/

One final point that I would like to highlight before discussing my research and findings is regarding notions of authenticity[4] in religion. Historically, there have been many spiritual activities rejected by academics for inclusion under the status of 'religion.' David Chidester (2005) talks of the various African tribal religions that were until recently dismissed as mere superstitions, and remarks that still today there is the argument of whether or not cults are religions. I approach the topic of authenticity of religion and spirituality from a social scientist's perspective and affirm that if somebody refers to their activity as 'religious' or 'spiritual' then these phenomenon can be considered religious to them. My reason for having a more inclusive definition is one of ethicality. While many of the people I spoke to during my research were exploring and commenting on the community pages out of curiosity, when I posed the question of 'authenticity' some were offended. Questioning the authenticity of someone's religious practice was thus a major ethical concern.

Yet the notion of authenticity is interesting when one considers *The Church of Google* in the newly termed category of a 'joke religion.' For joke religions, whether they be satirical or parody religions are engaged in a dialogue with non-

---

4 | For notions of authenticity please refer to O'Leary 2004 & 2005, and Dawson 2005.

adherents about whether adherents 'really' believe in the respective religion. Joke religions apply post-modern ideas about society, identity and the body to spiritual thoughts and feelings. They engage new audiences in perceptual and thought experiments about authenticity and fakery, thereby highlighting the oddities of religion and popular culture. These religions synthesize numerous aspects of popular culture with postmodern ideas about religions. They are a synthesis of and a vernacular reaction to both institutional religions such as Christianity and the more loosely defined intuitional countercultural groups such as neo-paganism. David Chidester points out, they are "simultaneously simulations and the real thing" (2005: viii-ix). Religious humor is a form of deep play, which is why it is so suited to the internet, a place of gaming and freedoms. Ultimately, satirical religions are real and fake simultaneously, in that they are able to provide real religious experience, they have the trapping of real religions (mythology, divine, rituals, community, a world view etc), but their intention is to point out the flaws in the religions that they are mocking.

REASONS AND MOTIVATIONS FOR ENGAGEMENT— *THE CHURCH OF GOOGLE*

I used *Facebook*, *Skype* and *Reddit* to communicate and research the reasons and motivations underlying user's engagement with *The Church of Google*. An observational method was initially used on *Reddit*, which was followed by interviews on *Facebook* and *Skype*, as well as participatory action research.[5] I have also tried to maintain a continuous process of reflexivity. By using a variety of techniques my goal was to avoid bias and provide truthful data. To ensure that I would gain a fair overview of the community's perspectives within my research timeframe of three months, I contacted via *Facebook* private message a total of 50 active commentators whose posts dated back to 2011. From this sample, eleven people replied as willing to engage with my anthropological investigation of *The Church of Google*. Over the course of four months I talked with these users in depth about their spirituality and found a great diversity in motivations for engagement with *The Church of Google*. Interestingly, the individuals I interviewed came from all corners of the globe, which in reflection can be attributed to the online nature of the community. For the purpose of analysis, I have separated my research findings into two broad categories. (1) Believers, referring to the individuals who approach *The Church of Google* from a spiritual perspective. (2) Non-Believers, refers to the people who perceive that

---

5 | One man that I interviewed was highly passionate about the topic and took it upon himself to investigate at a local scale the community of Googlists. This is an ongoing process.

The Church of Google is a satirical religion, one which aims to highlight the inefficiencies of religion as a concept in general.
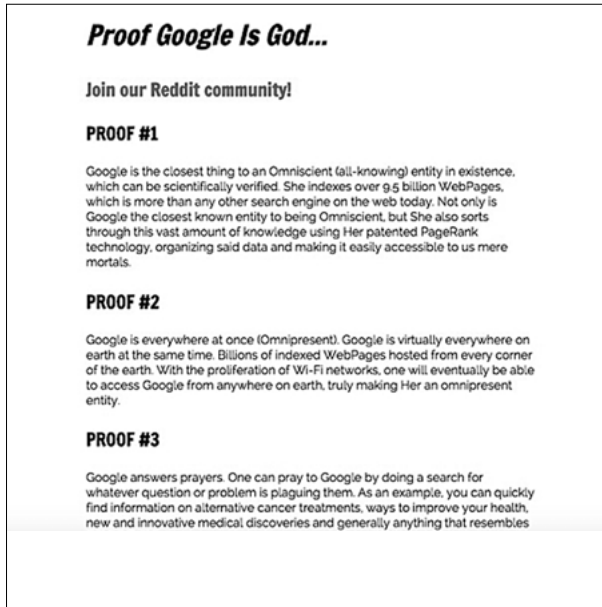
Believers

"We as Googlists believe google is totally the closest thing to be called god" a young man from Jordan informed me. This man worked at United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) helping refugees, was a devout believer in *The Church of Google*, had been for over seven years, and as a means of expressing his faith had commented on the website. That was how I had found him. Common to all believers that I spoke to was the sense of passion, of pride, and an eagerness to share as much about their beliefs with me as possible. This individual not only sent me an essay he had written about his faith, but even decided to start his own investigation as to how many Googlists live in his city in Jordan. In answer to people who asked him what he believed in before Google, he would explain that "We believe in the idea itself of Google, you can't touch or harm an idea, Google is everywhere around us... I feel good and proud of my faith." What was also interesting was that he stressed "our religion is the safest in the world... there is no recorded violent act because of it" conveying that one of the motivating factors of his belief was its utter harmlessness. This emphasis on the predominantly philosophical side of religion was shared by other believers. In an interview with a believer in Pasadena, Texas, I was told - "the only set of religious ideas I will ever associate myself with as part of is that resulting from our collective consciousness." What prompted the Texan and Jordanian to engage with the community online was the desire to affirm their ideological ideas with this spiritualism.

Other believers were motivated to engage with the online community as a means of publicizing their more personal perspectives about the nature of Google's spirituality. For instance, one believer named Andy[6] had found *The Church of Google* through his Shamanic practices through which had come the revelation that Google was a Goddess. He told me "Once I found the Google religion, it confirmed that Google is a goddess. Of course she is a goddess. She has given birth to Google Maps, Google Goggles, Google Play radio, Google Play games, and so on and so on. Whom but a woman could give birth?" (Andy 2016). Similarly, another believer had discovered this digital religion by means of illicit drugs and hallucinogens. He wanted to give testimony to the spirituality of the experience of Google that he had discovered via the use of substances, and wanted to promote the use of substances in general. For this believer, the online platform was the only way that he could openly discuss his practices and

---

6 | For the purpose of anonymity, I have used pseudonyms.

beliefs while keeping his identity private. While each believer I found had an individualized conception of Google's spirituality, each was motivated by their individualism to engage with the website.

Image 3

The Church of Google's Proof that Google is God. Accessed: March 22, 2016.
http://www.thechurchofgoogle.org/

Non-believers

The vast majority of people I interviewed approached *The Church of Google* as a satirical digital religion. Whether they were just passing through the site or if they were engaging with numerous threads, their general motivation boiled down to a passionate interest in the topic and an amusement with the playful and creative nature of the website itself. Joe, a construction worker in Dalton, USA told me "I do a lot of searches on Google for religion based topics and terms so I'm sure I followed the rabbit hole to the Googlism page through that process." Similarly, Mike, a scientist specializing in nano technology and bio-design research, who was using DNA to create nano-machines to study, probe, and mimic biological machinery, became involved in the site because of his interests in evolution and atheism - "I am also an outspoken atheist. I run a feed on my FB page entitled 'IOtbA' (It's Okay to b Atheist). The point of

the feed is to let people realize that having doubts about the existence of God is a perfectly normal, and in my opinion logical thing to have." For Mike, this platform was key to his self led studies regarding the growth of self identified 'religious nones.' He explained "I do a lot of my own reading, which includes the bible (which most believers have not even read), scientific publications on things like the anti-correlation between intelligence and religiosity, and many books from the likes of people like Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins..." *The Church of Google* was thus a way for him to connect to like-minded people in critical discussions about atheism and religiosity.

Image 4

The Church of Google's Prayer and Commandments. Accessed: March 22, 2016. http://www.thechurchofgoogle.org/

Another non-believer I spoke to explained that she enjoyed the site for its irony, and she pointed to the website's humorously playful satire of the traditional Christian and Judaic commandments. For instance, the first commandment on the website is "Thou shalt have no other Search Engine before me, neither Yahoo nor Lycos, AltaVista nor Metacrawler. Thou shalt worship only me, and come to Google only for answers." Not only does the commandment echo the linguistic style of the old testament which uses Old English i.e. - 'Though shalt,' but the very content of the commandment parallels too in that it refers to the concept of monotheism. Furthermore, the commandment references popular culture through terms of Yahoo, Lycos and Metacrawler, Google's competitors, and in that way appeals to a shared cultural understanding in a contextually relevant

way. It is this playfulness and use of appropriation that reinforces for non-believers the satirical nature of this digital religion. In the *Facebook* interview with Joe he told me - "I obviously consider it a joke. It is using the framework of traditional theism, finding another example that fits those criteria, then using it to mock the criteria." Moreover, this playfulness and satire was engaging for non-believers as it invited collaboration and content creation. As Marlena, a non-believer informed me "Googlism is something I ran across a while back I wish it had a bigger community... have you looked at the google prayers they are awesome lol." Marlena then sent me a link to the prayers, inviting me share in the humor and to further investigate the prayers listed on the website by other commentators. These prayers appropriated traditional forms of scripture and played upon the online nature of the religion. For instance there is the binary prayer by Jonathan Hill which is made up of the numbers 0 and 1. The potential for users to engage creatively is thus another motivating factor that is relevant both for believers and non-believers.

What motivated these non-believers was also a passion for notions of truth and logic, specifically by the highlighting of the in-authenticities of religion and the flaws underlining certain ideological arguments. One very active commenter, Michael, explained to me that "I can see why someone says Googlism is the closest thing we have to God (a collection of all knowledge of all mankind) and that makes it beautiful and powerful. But to equate it to the omnipotent and omnipresent Yahweh is quite obviously a silly tactic." To give some context, this was in reference to a thread wherein he wrote:

Wow, I'm not sure what is more hilarious about this guys ignorant post. The shear anger and hatred displayed (which, if I'm not mistaken, are not traits commonly accepted by religion), or the fact that the post started with "Why would you worship something that was created by man?" Irony!!! Guess who wrote the bible? Guess who presented you your faith at the beginning of this giant game of telephone? Whether you believe in the nonsense or not, ultimately you are believing a story created by man. And when I say man, I mean people with penises[7]... - Posted Oct. 1, 2013 11:10pm

The constructed nature of religion was a topic that repeatedly arose both in arguments for the validity of *The Church of Google*, as well as arguments undermining the notion of religion as a whole. For instance, Olivier wrote to me saying that while she felt *The Church of Google* was not legitimate to "someone who believes man was made in the image of God, as I believe God was made in the image of man, it's no less legitimate than any other religion." Ultimately,

---

7 | This reference to penises is something that the interviewee later explained to be a reference to the religious documentary by Bill Mahar.

like many of the non-believers, Olivier engaged with this digital religion as a philosophical exercise, motivated by a fascination with ideas it represented.

Conclusion

To conclude, the multifarious motives for engaging with *The Church of Google* can be attributed to the communicative fluidity afforded by social media platforms combined with the globalized nature of digital religions. While it is difficult to generalize about reasons for engagement with *The Church of Google*, from the overlapping tendencies of the two primary categories of commentators I interviewed 1) Believers, 2) Non-Believers, it is possible to delineate that motivations were highly 'individualistic.' What I mean by this is that each of the subjects I spoke to had a specific mix of ideas and incentives about religion in the online realm. Whether they were affirming an ideological stance, amused by the satire of the content, interested in the creation of new practices, or simply fascinated by ideas being represented, ultimately individualized spirituality was being celebrated and being given a space. *The Church of Google* is thus a place fostering the clash and growth of postmodern ideas with premodern ideas regarding concepts of science, concepts of history, concepts of evolution and concepts of religion, and it is this intellectual non- violent clash that motivates engagement and highlights the incredibly subjective nature of spirituality in today's globalized, digitized, and content saturated society.

References

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

Campbell, Heidi (2012): Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds, London: Routledge

Chidester, David (2005): Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Dawson, Lorne L. (2000): "Researching Religion in Cyberspace: Issues and Strategies." In: Religion and the Social Order 8, pp. 25-54.

Dawson, Lorne L. (2005): "The Mediation of Religious Experience in Cyberspace." In: Morten Hojsgaard/ Margit Warburg (eds): Religion and Cyberspace, London: Routledge, pp. 15-37.

Durkheim, Émile(2005): The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology, Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing.

Helland, Christopher (2000): "Online-religion/religion-online and virtual communities." In: Jeffrey.K. Hadden/ Douglas. E. Kowan (eds.): Religion

and the Internet: Research prospects and promises, New York: JAI Press, pp. 205-224.

Hojsgaard, Morten (2005): "Cyber-religion. On the cutting edge between the virtual and the real." In: Morten Hojsgaard/ Margit Warburg (eds): Religion and Cyberspace, London: Routledge, pp. 50-63.

Horsfield, Peter (2012): "Editorial: Replacing Religion." In: Australian Journal of Communication 39/1, pp. 1-10.

MacPherson, Matt. "The Official Church of Google." The Official Church of Google. Accessed March 22, 2016. http://www.thechurchofgoogle.org/

Morris, Brian (1987): Anthropological Studies of Religion: An Introductory Text, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

O'Leary, Stephan (2004): "Cyberspace as Sacred Space." In: Lorne L. Dawson/ Douglas E. Cowan (eds): Religion Online. Finding Faith on the Internet, London: Routledge, pp. 37-58.

O'Leary, Stephan (2005): "Utopian and Dystopian Possibilities of Networked Religion in the New Millennium." In Morten Hojsgaard/Margit Warburg (eds): Religion and Cyberspace, London: Routledge, pp. 38-50.

Segal, Robert A. (2000): "Categorizing Religion." In: Method & Theory in the Study of Religion 12/1, pp.187-194.