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MARKETING OF RELIGION IN CYBERSPACE

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Track: Conceptual Papers / Marketing Theory

Abstract

The Internet has begun to play a significant role in people's lives, albeit in the lives of people living on the 'right' side of the digital divide. Yet, the nexus between religion and the Internet has seldom been discussed in the marketing context. This paper investigates the effect of the Internet on how people use the new technology to fulfill their spiritual and religious needs. The marketing implications of this nascent but widely spreading phenomenon are discussed since this trend has a significant impact on the providers of spiritual and religious services.

Introduction

An article recently posted on the *Christianity Today* website carries the title, "The Next Billy Graham May Be a Robot." Indeed, ever since the Internet has been available as a medium of commerce, religion and pornography are the two industries that have capitalized most on the potential possibilities of this mode of communication. But while religious organizations have been using the Internet to spread their message for quite some time, there is little discussion of this major trend in scholarly management literature. This oversight is all the more baffling in light of the recent attention devoted by management scholars to issues such as spirituality and religion, and to how spirituality and religion affect the workplace and the marketplace (Biberman and Whitty 1997; Mittelstaedt 2002).

Scholars observing the phenomenon of religion in cyberspace argue that the role of the Internet as the primary medium for religious delivery as well as a provider of religious information will grow to cosmic proportions in the very near future (pun intended). At a time when people's spiritual needs are becoming more prominent than ever before (Fogel 2000), the availability of Internet technology could revolutionize the way in which religious organizations will compete for the psyche and the pocketbook of Web pilgrim. This new method of religious delivery and consumption has implications with regard to the marketing mix provided by the various religious institutions as well as for their internal organizational setup. Above all, it portends an urgent need to conduct massive market research so as to better understand the needs, desires, and motivations of religious surfers.

This paper has three broad objectives: (1) to offer a working definition of religion that may be used in future studies discussing the phenomenon of religion; (2) to discuss how the Internet has impacted the domain of religion; and (3) to highlight major marketing implications of the impact of the Internet on religion.

Defining Religion

A quick study of the literature on religion would immediately uncover that there is no one widely agreed upon definition of the term (Clark 1958; [Dialmy 2001](#); Machalek 1977; Moberg 2002; Pargament 1999; Schneiders 1989; [Zinnbauer, et al. 1997](#)). The few studies that deal with religion in marketing ([Klein 1987](#); [Mittelstaedt 2002](#)) do not even offer a definition of the construct. If scholars in management and marketing are to have a meaningful dialogue on the topic of religion, it is important that the concept be clarified by way of an operational definition.

The *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion* (Reese 1999, p.647) offers the following explanation for religion: “Religion – from the Latin ‘religare’ (to bind back) – typically the term refers to an institution with a recognized body of communicants who gather together regularly for worship, and accept a set of doctrines offering some means of relating the individual to what is taken to be the ultimate nature of reality.” The definitional problem with regard to religion arises mainly because of scholars’ inability to separate the construct of religion from that of spirituality ([Dialmy 2001](#); Moberg 2002; Zinnbauer, Pargament and Scott 1999). Here is not the place to get into the spirituality/religion debate. Suffice it to say that for the purposes of his paper, spirituality has been viewed as an individual’s engagement to explore and connect one’s inner self with the known world and Beyond (cf. Kale 2003). Religion, in this paper, has been viewed as a specific spiritual tradition usually emanating from some foundational experience of divine or cosmic revelation that facilitates the spiritual quest of a seeker. In other words, spirituality deals with the territory and religion offers a roadmap of the territory. Spirituality, in and of itself, is not predicated upon the practice of any one religion.

Weaving the Web of Religion

Joshua Ramo was among the first to foresee the impact of Internet technology on religion. In his December 16, 1996 article appearing in *Time* magazine, Ramo wrote, “Like schools, like businesses, like governments, like nearly everyone, it seems, religious groups are rushing online, setting up church homepages, broadcasting dogma, and establishing theological newsgroups, bulletin boards and chat rooms. Almost overnight, the electronic community of the Internet has come to resemble a high-speed spiritual bazaar, where thousands of the faithful—and equal numbers of the faithless—meet and debate and swap ideas about things many of us had long since stopped discussing in public, like our faith and religious beliefs. It’s an astonishing act of technological and intellectual mainstreaming that is changing the character of the Internet, and could even change our ideas about God.”

Spirituality & Health Magazine (2001) reports a study by pollster George Barna which suggests that by the end of this decade, more than 50 million Americans may be using the Internet as their sole means of religious experience. Clearly, for an ever-growing band of believers, the Internet has become a place where one can easily find God. Web search engines list millions of sites for seekers interested in spiritual and religious material. Apart from host sites of every conceivable religion and denomination that provide information, one can find sites that take online prayer requests and offer newsgroups for dialogue among followers. An Internet search on Google recently conducted by the lead author of this article picked up over 19 million web pages for the word “Christian,” 2,130,000 for “Islam,” 660,000 for “Hindu,” 461,000 for “Wicca,” and just under 5 million for the words “New Age.” Online services such as AOL and Yahoo! have large areas devoted to religion—from

traditional Christian Bible study groups to neo-pagan rituals and practices associated with new religious movements (NRMs). This burgeoning growth of religious material on the Internet can be explained in part by four unique features of cyber-communication.

First, as the Internet transcends the barriers of time and space, Web spirituality and Web religion suddenly begin to enjoy unprecedented access on a global scale, thus allowing long-established religious communities and newly mushroomed spiritual movements alike to reach non-allied potential followers like never before. In other words, the market for religion has become deterritorialized and globalized. Second, the democratic nature of the Web enables almost anybody to create new circles of faith overnight, thereby increasing supply and choices in a previously oligopolistic market. This changes the nature and level of competition in the religious marketplace. Third, the very nature of the Internet allows it to reach those groups who may find it difficult to participate in traditional communal worship. People desirous of religious products or services who have been excluded by traditional keepers of the faith or who have chosen to exclude themselves from their religious community can now access religious material remotely and anonymously. For example, the *White Crane Journal* is an eclectic quarterly e-zine devoted to gay men's spirituality. Gay Muslims can find spiritual solace on *Queer Jihad*, lesbian Catholics can access *Conferens for Catholic Lesbians*, and gay and lesbians of the Buddhist persuasion could derive spiritual inspiration at *Buddha Buddies*. Finally, the convenience afforded by the Internet enables people easy access to religious materials, materials pertaining to their own faith and of other faiths. Stellan (2001) reports results from a survey conducted by the *Pew Internet and American Life Project*, which suggests that 25 percent of all adult Internet users had gone online in search of spiritual and religious material. This figure surpasses the number of cyber-users who have gambled, traded stocks, or participated in auctions online.

It is not just information on various religions that the Web provides. The Internet also allows devotees to worship remotely – in an asynchronous as well as synchronous form. Helland (2003) has classified Internet spiritual and religious offerings into two categories: *religion-online* and *online-religion*. Religion-online involves the traditional forms of Web communication with no interactivity. On-line religion, on the other hand, mirrors the ideal interactive Web environment and facilitates many-to-many communication. The Web pilgrim visiting a typical online-religion site can partake in online prayer, worship, and even meditation. Some spiritual and religious Websites now offer an impressive array of Multimedia Flash presentations, real-time web cams, 360-degree panoramas, streaming audio and video, chat rooms, web forms for prayer, and e-mail addresses for pastoral care. In effect, they virtually offer every conceivable service that would be traditionally sought in a land pilgrimage or in a physical facility for communal worship. This virtual experience could substitute traditional church community in some cases and could augment the offerings of traditional institutions in others. Indeed, the advent of the Internet combined with the resurgence of all matters spiritual, raises some fascinating issues with regard to the religious marketplace.

Marketing Implications

Kale (2003) has argued that religion counters the sense of deterritorialization—an inevitable consequence of globalization--by offering its followers a multitude of “authenticating acts” and “authoritative performances.” Authenticating acts denote self-referential behaviors that are deemed to reveal or produce the “true” self. In contrast to the intensely personal authenticating acts, authoritative performances tend to be collectively oriented. They are cultural displays (such as festivals and rituals) designed to create a communally shared

experience. Authoritative performances represent the quintessential quest for unity between self and society. Both authentic acts as well as authoritative performances facilitate a sense of 'being centered' in today's deterritorialized global society (cf. Arnould, Price and Zinkhan 2003). Thus, the renewed interest in religion and all matters spiritual is partly an artifact of globalization, a phenomenon that has, in no small measure, been shaped by the Internet. In the context of religion, Internet technology has spawned a spiritual cyberscape that affects the demand as well as the supply side of the religious marketplace.

As mentioned earlier, one interesting phenomenon of cyber-religion is the sheer number of choices now available on the Web. Consumers of religion have an unprecedented array of offerings from which to choose a product mix that satisfies their spiritual utility. On the one hand, this makes the religious market more fragmented, thereby adversely impacting the market share of long established religions such as Catholicism and Anglican Christianity. On the other hand, Web surfers are becoming more enlightened about religions besides their own, thus acting as better-informed consumers. Together, this will result in the religious markets assuming the characteristics of free market global competition. The providers who shall prosper in this increasingly competitive market will be those that excel in judicious targeting and precise positioning. Simply put, the Internet will require religious providers to become astute brand managers.

Along with increased competition arises the issue of distribution. Several Internet religious site sponsors have impressive brick and marble stores all over the world. Presence of such groups on the Web is intended to provide information and to further widen the reach of the sponsors. However, the market for religion is changing both in terms of consumer characteristics as well as in terms of the place where consumers choose to practice their chosen religion. Demographer George Barna has warned that by the end of the decade, millions of individuals with no current faith community will take to religious practice and worship on the Web. But he also warns that millions of other seekers on the Web will be people who drop out of the physical church in favor of the cyber-church. If Barna is right in his predictions, and the current trends suggest that he is, established religions will have to bring to their cyber-stores the same ornate façade and pomp that they have used in their physical churches. They will also need to ensure that their online facility can effectively function as a cash register!

A 2001 report by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (www.pewinternet.org) observes, "It is hardly a revelation that Religion Surfers contribute to their places of worship. Fully 92% of them have done that. However, only a few have actually used the Internet to make contributions. Just 7% of Religion Surfers have made donations to a religious organization they found online. And only a fraction of that small group (14%) has actually made the contribution online." Since contributions from the faithful fuel the activities of all religious organizations, religious providers need to increase their focus on devising ways and means to increase online contributions.

Another issue worthy of consideration with the dawn of virtual religion is the organization structure of religious organizations. Almost anyone with access to the Internet can start a faith community and reach millions of potential followers with a few clicks. Such a religious entrepreneur naturally possesses the nimbleness and agility that religions with a hierarchical organizational structure do not. This will put increasing pressure on established religions to decentralize and democratize their organizations. Failing to do so will result in them remaining a behemoth lacking the speed and flexibility required to compete in the digital

marketplace. Failing to adapt to the new market realities will result in some groups sinking into oblivion.

Not much is known about consumer shopping behavior when it comes to religion on the Internet. What we do know is based on surveys of Web users that have been initiated only in the last five years and largely restricted to surfers from the United States. Compared to the population at large, pilgrims in cyberspace tend to exhibit a stronger commitment to faith (Larsen 2001). This would probably make Web pilgrims more brand loyal than those seeking spiritual solace exclusively in the brick and mortar (and sometimes marble) environment. Laney (1998) has stated that Christian Web users are predominantly white, middle class, college educated and married. These users rate religion as the main reason for their online forays. Respondents in this survey expressed a high degree of preference for interactive control over Web content through such channels as prayer requests, inspirational messages and music. Findings such as these have important design implications for suppliers of online-religion.

But Christians account for only 30 percent of the world's population and the United States accounts for a mere five percent of the planet's inhabitants. Little is known about the remaining 70 percent of surfers who are non-Christians and the 95 percent who are non-Americans! Increased globalization mandates immediate attention toward understanding the Web behavior of non-Christians and non-Americans seeking religious information, guidance, and community on the Internet. Only then will the various religious organizations be able to devise appropriate Web strategies that will empower them to proselytize on a global scale.

The product-mix desired by religious consumers also deserves immediate attention. The information age has made it very convenient to gain access to information regarding the teachings and practices of various cults and religions. Increased ease of access will result in religious consumers becoming more open to experimentation and to combining elements from diverse religions in their spiritual practices. In the United States, we see new attempts at syncretism typically involving a Christian base with teachings borrowed from Hinduism, Buddhism, or Eastern thought. Addressing the issue of spiritual syncretism underway in the U.S., Albanese (2000, 18) writes, "...it seemingly permeating everything, as polls showed one-fifth to one-fourth of the American people embracing notions of karma and reincarnation and speaking a cultural language that evoked New Age ways of talking—about the 'universe,' about 'energy,' about self- and reality creation. Above all, it pointed the way to religious combination as the essence of its spiritual form. New Agers freely borrowed and appropriated from a variety of traditions, and in turn invented their own... (T) heir movement grew and transformed and continued into the twenty-first century."

In discussing global religious trends, Sellers (1998) cites 'blending of faiths' as one of the major features of the current religious ethos. He attributes this trend to the worldwide mixture of peoples and faiths, and the ability to communicate across geographic lines. Sellers argues that syncretism is happening not just at the level of the individual, but at denominational leadership levels as well. He cites the example of some mainline Protestant groups who have incorporated Native American practices and viewpoints into some of their celebrations. Given the diversity of the Internet population and the endless combinations possible, ongoing market research on the part of religious providers will be needed to ensure that the targeted segments are delivered the appropriate product mix, online or off.

At a more expedient level, providers of religion who currently rely on the physical church will need to devote significant attention to their Web strategy. At present, little is known about how well traditional brands such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), the Church of Scientology, and, most notably, the Vatican travel on the information superhighway. Religious providers will need to understand how their online presence affects brand loyalty and satisfaction among their more puritanical followers. Does online presence cause the followers of a religion to make fewer “store” visits? How should religious providers plan their revenue streams while adapting their products and services to the Web? These are crucial questions that can only be answered through market research and careful experimentation.

Finally, presence of religious organizations on the Web also poses a challenge to free and fair competition. Currently, the wealthier religious traditions and denominations are paying large sums of money to appear as the first sites recommended by various search engines. As the Web continues to expand, this feature will become even more relevant from an antitrust perspective. Guardians of fair competition will have to grapple with financially strong religious providers creating a monopoly of sorts, thus restricting assortment at a time when consumers are clamoring for more choices and greater assortment.

Marketing Questions for Future Research

Pilgrims in cyberspace tend to exhibit a very strong commitment to faith in comparison with the population at large (Larsen 2001). From a macro-marketing perspective, it is important to understand how the Internet as a channel of delivery for spiritual goods complements or impacts the traditional communal channels such as churches. Against this background the following four research questions can aid future research.

- 1) *What are the costs and benefits associated with on-line religion as opposed to the traditional channels of delivery?*
- 2) Does on-line religion accelerate the deterritorialization process or is it a response to deterritorialization?
- 3) *Do consumers of on-line religion report greater satisfaction in the fulfillment of their spiritual needs as opposed to those seeking the spiritual in more traditional outlets?*
- 4) Will financially strong providers create a monopoly of sorts, thus restricting assortment at a time when consumers express a preference for more choices and greater assortment?

Several managerial and public policy issues will no doubt surface as the Internet continues to gain in ascendancy as a channel of delivery for all things religious. The task for marketing scholars is to stay at the top of these issues so that they can contribute their informed understanding to matters of marketing management and public policy in religion.

Conclusion

The Internet, as predicted by Ramo (1996), has indeed a spiritual bazaar of cosmic proportions, offering previously unimaginable assortment and choices. This new pulpit has come into vogue at a time when the religious marketplace is moving in two contrary directions: fundamentalism on one side and increased ideological syncretism on the other. The wide reach of Internet and its capacity to overcome the tyranny of distance makes it an attractive medium for religious providers. Competition and clutter in this medium will only

increase as even more religious providers realize the promise of the Internet in their attempts to save souls and to raise money so that they can save more souls. The time has come for academics to devote their attention to this watershed phenomenon.

Religion in cyberspace constitutes a promising area for scholarly research within the marketing discipline. Such endeavors will further our understanding of consumer behavior in contemporary postmodern times. The output will guide public policy and inform religious providers with appropriate perspectives and strategies. Maybe it was the Internet that Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) visualized when he talked about the “noosphere.” Marketers can do their bit to make the Internet, a “network of economic and psychic affiliations,” which Teilhard prophesized; a place of fair religious discourse and a reservoir of spiritual treasures. As the ranks of Web pilgrims continue to grow, it behooves marketing scholars to make people’s experiences on the information superhighway a meaningful voyage toward spiritual fulfillment.

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