The mass-suicide of thirty-nine members of Heaven's Gate, on 26 March 1997, thrust the presence of new religions on the Internet into the public eye. Overnight the question of "cults in cyberspace" became a social problem as the group's extensive use of the Internet became known (Hoffman and Burke 1997). A wave of somewhat sensational feature stories rippled through the media. A *The New York Times* headline read "From porn to cults, the Net looks nasty," while *Newsweek* called on the double entendre "Web of Death." Online, surprisingly, the fears raised were sometimes even more extreme (e.g., "The Internet as a god and propaganda tool for cults" on CNN's site). In the first flush of tragedy it became apparent that the problem sensed by the public was double-edged. On the one hand, there were the old suspicions of "cults." On the other hand, there were new worries about the mysteries of cyberspace itself. Had the investment of the Heaven's Gate group in the Internet led them astray in some way? Were impressionable minds exposed to influences on the world wide web that they could not adequately handle? Had the journey into virtual reality somehow fostered their confidence in a life "beyond the level of the human" and the destruction of their bodies? It was the conjunction of these two concerns that inflamed the imaginations of the press (see Robinson, 1997 for an overview).

Yet the presence of new religious movements on the net was, in some ways, old news by 1997. Like American fundamentalists in the first half of the twentieth century, the exponents of new religious views had been quick to realize the potential of the new medium for evangelism. Somewhat ironically, for the fundamentalists, the advent of radio, and then television, was taken as a Godsend (cite Frankel, 1987 or Ammerman, 1991). Hundreds of even smaller and more exceptional new religions were perhaps even quicker to seize the opportunity presented by the Internet. Instant contact with thousands
of people around the world, and all in a remarkably inexpensive and highly adaptable way to spread the word, attract new members, canvass donations, and distribute or sell literature and merchandise. Today most of the better known new religious movements operate quite sophisticated web sites, as do hundreds of quite obscure groups (see Cottee, Yateman, and Dawson 1996, and Dawson and Hennebry 1999). With the quick stroke of a few keys anyone can bring the literature from a new religion in Japan to their mailbox in less than a week. How easy it is, and one do not even have to run the risk of speaking with anyone.

But this ease of communication poses a problem as well. One has no need to become further engaged with the group either. Will the Internet, for all its vaunted interactivity, when compared with the established broadcast media (e.g., magazines, books, radio and television), become a powerful tool of cult recruitment? I have my doubts. As Hennebry and I (Dawson and Hennebry 1999) have argued elsewhere, the nature of religious contact offered on the web, at least so far, tends to be too detached. Successful recruitment, as we now know (see Dawson 1998a, chapter three), relies heavily on intense personal interaction with members of the religion and involvement in their activities. The exaggerated fears of “spiritual predators” stalking the web can be quelled, then, by a simple examination of the facts. But in exploring the issue of recruitment through the net, other less obvious and potentially far more telling and fascinating concerns arise. As the growing chorus of both self-appointed and scholarly gurus of computer-mediated communication keep telling us, it is a mistake to think of the Internet as just another supposedly neutral means of communication. It is not so much an instrument as a new environment or context, one “corresponding to space-worlds and time-worlds that never before existed in human history” (Holmes 1997, 3). The very nature and reach of human consciousness and culture are being extended, and hence changed, by the new virtual technologies arising around us. Just as our consciousness and culture were changed in the past by the automobile, television, and all the other technological wonders of the modern age. Marshall McLuhan (1964) pointed all this out long ago, but the message is still sinking in. Media technologies change who we are by virtue of their use and regardless of what we choose to transmit through them. What, then, might be some of the anticipated and unanticipated consequences of the religious uses of the Internet?

In this essay I will briefly survey some of the issues at hand, discussing five supposed advantages of religious life on the Internet and then five criticisms of the same. My account of even the advantages, however, is ambivalent at best. The lure of cyberspace remains strong and it is unlikely
that the cultural, social, and psychological consequences of the Internet for religion can be avoided or reversed. The move of religion into a netted world is a component part of the larger processes that are changing the social face of religion before our eyes (e.g., Roof 1996; Dawson 1998b). So it is important that we begin to think more clearly about the possible consequences of this technology for religion, even though we are still only at the dawn of the Internet age and fumbling over ourselves to understand it.

1. Religion and the Promise of the Internet

1.1 Spreading the Word

Let us start with the obvious. As indicated, anyone with a small investment in some computer hardware, software, and training can mount a web page, and operate it at little expense. With the right specification of encoded “keywords” that page may become rapidly available to a potential audience of millions through the various “search engines” used to surf the net. This audience is expanding at an astronomically rapid rate, and it tends, at present, to be a relatively up-scale market for what anyone may be selling -- precisely the people most new religions wish to contact in their quest to mobilize resources (i.e., influential and helpful people with money). As Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge (1996: 235-237) have argued, there are sound sociological reasons for the interest of new religions in the elite elements of society, and for the appeal of certain kinds of new religions to these cultural elites (detailed in Dawson and Hennebry 1999: 29-30). In other words, the Internet is probably facilitating the natural proselytizing tendencies of “cults,” and in ways running contrary to the mistaken assumptions of the public. Contemporary new religions have been recruiting relatively well educated, it somewhat disaffected, middle class kids (i.e., young adults), not the maladjusted and/or marginalized members of our societies. There is a pronounced overlap between precisely those who have joined new religions in the last few decades and the primary users of the Internet, though the users of the net may on the whole be a bit older (see Dawson 1998a; Dawson and Hennebry 1999). As a means of evangelism and proselytization the Internet is able to circumvent, moreover, the political and commercial dominance of more conventional media by the elite defenders of the status quo. Accordingly, the Internet has truly become a haven for a plethora of alternative religions and spiritualities, from lesbian witchcraft to white-supremacist apocalypticism.

All the same, to sound the first note of ambivalence, from the beginning of
the world wide web, commentators have been anticipating that the vaunted anarchy of online culture may be stifled by its rapid commercialization. As the student of religion Jay Kinney observed as far back as 1995: “Since the Web allows a much broader palette of expression than mere text, it is likely that in short order it will be dominated by cultural professionals (i.e., entertainment conglomerates, publishing houses, ad agencies, professional designers and writers et al.) who will push the medium to a level of technical sophistication that by definition will require their services” (Kinney 1995: 770-771). For the larger and older new religions (e.g., Scientology, Eckankar, Church Universal and Triumphant), this developmental pattern need not pose a serious problem. They have been able to turn some of their members into skilled professionals in web page design. Many small groups also have been able to maintain their presence through the dedicated efforts of remarkably creative amateurs. In fact the success of these sites points towards the oft noted affinity between new religious orientations, like neo-paganism, and people working in the computer industry (e.g., Adler 1986, Luhrmann 1989, Kinney 1995, and Davis 1995). Yet, as any moderate surfer of the web can attest, it is becoming increasingly hard to navigate the web without the constant and unwanted intrusion of commercial sites, as companies have learned to parasitically play upon the search terms commonly used to pursue decidedly non-commercial topics. The ever present and rather repellant commercialism can be quite frustrating and short-circuit the desire of many to use the web as a means of investigating new forms of religious life.

1.2 Building New Communities

The Internet provides an unparalleled means, however, for those already “in-the-know” to stay in touch with each other. This is the second advantage of the Internet. New religious communities can be formed and operate over vast geographical distances, as regular twenty-four hour contact can be maintained in a relatively inexpensive manner. The monthly newsletter can be supplemented by or even replaced by the daily message of inspiration and instruction, with the added possibility of immediate interaction between the leadership and distant followers, and between the followers themselves. The Internet also opens up the possibility of much more direct and frequent contact between representatives of a new religious organization and other potentially helpful members of the broader public and various professional communities (like scholars of religion). This kind of networking greatly enhances the ability of such groups to rally allies in the face of legal challenges, negative media reports, and the other crises that arise from time to
time.

Early sociological discussions of the net, and analyses by some of the Internet's more avid promoters, are replete with words of praise for the new kinds of community made possible by the Internet (e.g., Rheingold 1993; Barlow, Birkerts, Kelly, and Slouka 1995; Jones 1995; Shields 1996; Barlow 1996). The defining feature of these new communities is the freedom allowed by the technology. First, there is the much vaunted freedom to overcome the constraints of the "flesh" (Holmes 1997: 7), the communicative restraints, that is, of Cartesian space and the natural cycles of time. Second, with the relative anonymity of communicating on the Internet there is the freedom to either overcome or ignore the biases born of the systems of stratification in which we all conventionally live. One need not know, and often cannot know, the class, occupation, race, ethnicity, age, or sex of those one is communicating with, and it is not uncommon for people to assume many different identities in the different kinds of virtual spaces available on the net.

In fact the great plurality and potential anonymity of computer-mediated communication allows for the subversion or at least circumvention of many aspects of institutional social control. Significant censorship of the Internet, at least from any centralized source (as opposed to voluntarily at the receiving end), remains unlikely in the face of the speed with which information can be spread throughout the vast reaches of the net and hidden by various ruses. It can be very difficult to track the source of some information and almost impossible to technically or legally suppress the sources of undesired information, with or without the co-operation of the various net providers (see e.g., Frankel 1996; Grossman 1997; Peckham 1998). With the onset of sophisticated encryption programmes this state of affairs is being reinforced. Controls can be applied, of course, through the creation of new legislation and by the adaptive application of existing laws, like those designed to protect the young from unwanted influences, individuals from harassment, fraud and other crimes, and to protect groups and companies against the infringement of their copyright and other proprietary rights. In this regard diverse policy initiatives are being pursued throughout the world (Racicot, Hayes, Szibbo and Trudel 1997; Loader 1997; De Santis 1998). But the Internet far exceeds the capacity of all other conventional means of communication for the distribution, en mass or otherwise, of either illicit or counter-hegemonic information. The Internet offers succour to those wishing to develop "oppositional subjectivities hitherto excluded from the public space " (Holmes 1997:13).

This means the web also can be used to reduce the stigma of engaging in a deviant religious lifestyle (amongst other things). It provides a new and even
safer way to be deviant, while "passing" as normal (Goffman 1963). This should facilitate the proliferation of a even greater number of new forms of religious expression in our already pluralistic and globalizing culture. Of course, it is then easier for groups to plan and execute acts of religious extremism as well, like the murders and suicides undertaken by the Solar Temple, Aum Shinrikyo, and Heaven's Gate. Curiously, however, in the case of Heaven's Gate, the only one of these three groups to actually use the world wide web to further its ends, no one seems have been listening when they declared their intention to end it all on their web site. If we can learn from this mistake, monitoring the net may facilitate the prevention of similar tragedies in the future. (Just as tragedy may have been averted had the Denver police paid addition to complaints made to them about the threats posted to web sites by the young gunmen who murdered thirteen people in their high school in Littleton, Colorado in May of 1999.)

1.3 Boundary Breaking

In principle, a third advantage of religious participation in the Internet is what Kinney calls the opportunity for "boundary-breaking discussion" (1995: 770). The Internet tends to foster, both intentionally and accidentally, inter-religious dialogue and perhaps even ecumenism. It does so by exposing people to a myriad of alternative religious views from around the world. This exposure can be relatively passive, as when people surf the hundreds of web sites dedicated to religious beliefs and practices, or relatively active, as when people enter into conversations and debates about issues raised in the numerous Usenet news groups focused on religion or spirituality (ranging from alt.atheism through talk.religion.buddhism to alt.religion.scientology). No generation in human history has had the same opportunity to simply talk about religion with so many others, of all kinds of persuasions, and often in the frank ways facilitated by the relative anonymity of the Internet. Neither geographic nor social location need be an impediment any longer to the exercise of our religious imaginations or our passions, at least in terms of the exploration of ideas. The Internet can provide a broad, if not always very deep, education in the diverse religious heritage of humankind, and thus also in the very nature of religiosity itself. By lifting people, in potential at least, out of their relative "institutional enclosure," as Kinney (1995, 773) puts matters, it may even "lead to the creation of religious hybrids, idiosyncratic theologies, and informal liaisons between strange bedfellows." Whether this is thought to be a good thing or not will depend, of course, on one's point of view. It certainly is not for the defenders of orthodoxy or particularistic faiths.
But it may well be for the future of religion in general in our postmodern age.

1.4 Virtual Rituals

We can do more though than just talk about religion on the Internet. We can participate in virtual rituals, and this may be the fourth advantage of engaging in a computer-mediated religious life. This phenomenon is certainly not common yet, but it is happening. I know of three publications discussing such practices. The first two discuss, as might be expected, the activities of so-called technopagans (Davis 1995; O'Leary 1996). As noted earlier, it appears that there is a disproportionate presence of people working in computer-related fields in the neopagan movement, and accordingly, pagans are over-represented on the net. These technopagans, as Zaleski points out (1997, 275), "tend to hang out in MUDs like Division Web (telnet: bill.math.uconn.edu.9393) or in Usenet groups like alt.pagan and alt.magick. An outstanding Web guide to Pagan resources exists at Arachne's Web, located at http://www.cascade.net/arachne.html." The connection between these two communities rests, he suggests, with the conceptualization of cyberspace as an alternate reality. There are two aspects of the ritual traditions of neopaganism that resonate with life in cyberspace: (1) the eclectic and creative use of diverse symbols, words, and ritualistic actions to create a transitory sacred space for the inducement of (2) altered states of consciousness where the powers of the imagination are temporarily placed on an equal, if not superior, footing to those reason and ordinary reality (see e.g., Luhrmann 1989). Can the sacred circles of neopaganism really be created on the net? This is not the place to indulge in a detailed analysis of the possibilities. But limited descriptions of some attempts are provided by Davis (1995) and O'Leary (1996). Clearly a problem is posed by the complete substitution of typed words and computer-generated images and sounds for real bodies holding hands in real-time. Can the simulated dancing of computer generated "avatars" (iconic figures operated by the participants in games and other virtual reality sites) provide the sensate stimulation of real bodies swaying to the rhythm of a chant while circling an altar lit with many candles? O'Leary (1996) has his doubts. Nonetheless, as he states (1996, 803):

In almost all the transcripts we witness an attempt to recreate or simulate real space in virtual space and to sanctify a portion of this space as a theatre in which spirit is manifested; an establishing of difference with the world outside as well as with other territories of
cyberspace; and an assertion of the power of language to bring about wish fulfilment through the verbal act of declaring the wish within the ritual circle. To this extent, they appear as attempts to fulfil authentic spiritual needs now unmet by the major institutions of religious tradition.

In neopagan circles, we must recall, it is the practice for different members to create their own and constantly changing versions of the key rituals of the yearly cycle and other life cycle or singular events. Moreover, neopagans are often either compelled by their relative isolation or choose to practice their religion in a solitary manner. The Internet provides these neopagans with a remarkable new resource for creating and modifying rituals, and for sharing of their ritual innovations and experiences with others.

In the third study of virtual ritual, Ralph Schroeder, Noel Heather and Raymond Lee (1998) analyse the ritual practice of a charismatic E-Church. They describe how a small and constantly evolving group of Christians have attempted to replicate a charismatic meeting in cyberspace using an online multi-user virtual world. The meetings happen in a three dimensional computer-generated church where participants can move around and interact in the form of human-like avatars that operate from a first-person perspective on the world. After their analysis of the main features of the social interactions and text exchanges of a typical E-Church meeting, Schroeder et al. conclude (1998, 11):

Unsurprisingly, there are both similarities and differences [between the E-Church world and a conventional church service]: many practices and modes of communication -- the formal structure of the meeting, some of the content, as well as the roles -- are transferred from real world services into the virtual world. Some practices, however, are transformed by the technology, and may detract from the sense of a religious gathering; verbal exchanges become shorter, emotional solidarity with co-participants is weaker, and there is less orderliness to prayer meetings. But the technology also brings certain gains: the virtual church allows for more candid exchanges between participants, it enables a kind of access from all over the world that is not available in conventional services, and it permits experimentation in the use (and prior to that, the design) of the virtual space that is less constrained than a church in the real world.

Clearly these virtual manifestations of religious practice warrant more
study, particularly as they proliferate. Of course, it remains an open just question how common they are on the net in the first place. Regrettably, neither O'Leary (1996) nor Schroeder et al. (1998) move beyond a mere textual analysis of these ritual happenings. We need true qualitative studies of virtual rituality, entailing real-time participant observation and face-to-face interviews with those involved. There may be many different ways in which people are utilizing and responding to these situations. In his journalistic exploration of the religious uses of cyberspace, Zaleski (1997) expresses strong doubts about conveying the spiritual essence of religious practice, what he calls the subtle energies of prana, by the hyper-real simulations of computer-mediated communication. But he never studies any actual virtual rituals, and we lack the empirical data to say much about the veracity of his hunch.

1.5 Fostering a New Religious Consciousness

In discussions of religion on the Internet it is commonly noted that a new more ludic, reflexive, and even irreverent style of religious consciousness may be emerging in conjunction with this technology. In an earlier paper, Hennebry and I raised this point with regard to a particular religious creation of the Internet, a new religion called the Church ov MOO. The creators of this new religion, we noted, seem to be "attempting to devise a self-consciously postmodern, socially constructed, relativist, and self-referential system of religious ideas, purposefully and paradoxically infused with humour, irony, and farce, as well as a serious appreciation of the essentially religious or spiritual condition of humanity" (Dawson and Hennebry 1999, 35). In less extreme and systematic form, Davis (1995), O'Leary (1996), and Schroeder et al. (1998) found many of the same unconventional elements in the virtual rituals they studied. In these cases are we witnessing the adaption of religion to the cultural dictates of postmodernity? Could this development be considered a fifth advantage of doing religion on the Internet? O'Leary (1996, 803) clearly sees a connection (see Dawson 1998b as well), though he is less than sanguine about what is happening:

This conjunction of reverence and irreverence seems to be in some way characteristic of the spiritual situation of postmodern culture, which can neither dismiss religion nor embrace it wholeheartedly, but which ultimately leads to its commodification along with every other product and project of the past that is not doomed to be discarded in the ash-heap of history.
Evocatively he goes on to say that the “postmodern sensibility of [the] audiences [for these forms of religious expression] floats like a hummingbird over the flowers of the world’s historical archive, extracting nectar from the offerings of folk culture and high culture alike without distinction, employing language and the aesthetic conventions of a thousand traditions with allegiance to none” (1996, 803-804). Moreover, he concludes (1996, 804): “ritual action in cyberspace is constantly faced with the evidence of its own quality as constructed, as arbitrary, and as artificial, a game played with no material stakes or consequences.” Yet the game continues and becomes ever more elaborate and “the efficacy of ritual is affirmed, time and time again, even in the face of a full, self-conscious awareness of its artificiality.” (1996, 804). Or as the founders of the Church of MOO would say, because of its very self-conscious artificiality (Dawson and Hennebry 1999, 35-36). In the postmodern context of many contemporary societies, any other, less ludic, idiom of religious expression is likely to strike the cultural elite as too disingenuous or even delusional, and thus be unacceptable.

2. Religion and the Perils of the Internet

There is no particular order to the criticisms considered here. They are just some of the issues of note raised in the limited discussions of religion and the Internet so far. In some respects these criticisms overlap and their separation into distinct points is a bit artificial.

2.1 Misinformation Online

The first criticism that can be made of the use of the Internet as a means of religious communication stems from the disappointingly high ratio of “junk” information online. As Kinney succinctly predicted in 1995, “...the Net will encourage a rise in ill-informed debate, unintentional misinformation, emotional disputes, and the airing of stereotypes and dirty laundry” (Kenny 1995, 768). He was not willing to say then that the net was a “spiritual wasteland”, since many people were engaging in thoughtful and unique exchanges in some newsgroups. But he notes a marked tendency to degradation, a kind of Gresham’s law by which the “tremendous volume of trivial postings” was forcing serious discussants into specialty, invitation only, Usenet groups. The rapid commercialization of the world wide web is in many respects having the same effect, I suspect, as users are becoming disappointed with the endless barrage of advertising and insidious links to
nested commercial sites masquerading as sources of public information.

The ease of access to the Internet has returned us, in some respects, to the worst days of religious pamphleteering, when fanatics of one stripe or another openly castigated the religious beliefs and practices of others. In preparing a brief guide for students using the Internet for research on new religious movements, I was compelled to warn students to exercise great caution in interpreting what they find since “propaganda of one form or another rules the web” (Cottee, Yateman, and Dawson 1996, 468). The suppressed religious bigots of this world have suddenly gained a new lease on life, and views that would never receive significant public distribution through the older means of broadcast are now consistently and readily available on the Internet. The web is quite blatantly a realm of vested interests, and as Kenny laments, we are witnessing “...increased opportunity for conflict and even computer-mediated warfare between religious individuals who trigger each other's defences.” (1995, 773).

With these points in mind let us briefly consider an odd little exchange drawn from the web at the time of the Heaven's Gate tragedy. The web site of Heaven's Gate reveals that they believed their leaders (Ti and Do) to be aliens temporarily incarnated in human bodies to help humankind attain “the level beyond human.” The members of this group committed suicide to leave their bodily “vehicles” and follow their leaders to this level. They had been preparing to do this for more than a decade. Jesus and his disciples, we are told, were an earlier version of themselves, and over the centuries other alien visitors have been mistakenly identified as “angels,” while some other disincarnate, but negative and threatening aliens, have been misidentified as “fallen angels,” Satan and so on. The members of Heaven's Gate chose the time they did to depart this world because they believed the cosmic signs were right, that an apocalypse was at hand, and that they were about to be covertly persecuted by government agents. These ideas are rather surreal in themselves, especially when we think of the deaths that serenely ensued. But the story is given an even more bizarre twist on another web page. A Christian anti-cult organization called Watcher declared on its website that they were not surprised by the Heaven's Gate suicides, because they had been warning for years “about the potential for people to be deceived by 'aliens' (who are really fallen angels).” Having neatly inverted the Heaven's Gate reading of the situation, they think the dangerously misleading ideas of Heaven's Gate should be removed from the Internet. The Watcher site then goes on to decry how others have falsely accused them of being a cult, just like Heaven's Gate, and to predict, on the basis of some rather platitudinous comments made by President Clinton about the Heaven's Gate deaths, that the
government will soon be plotting to suppress their "legitimate" religious message. Why? Because the government does not want anyone thinking for themselves (unlike, presumably, the members of Watcher), or in ways contrary to its secular-humanist agenda, especially not on the "information super highway." Clearly, they finally assert, all of this is a sign that we are truly living in the end of days and must begin to prepare for the worst.

There is an Alice-in-Wonderland quality to this exchange that might lead us to dismiss it out of hand. But in browsing the web one can see that this curious twist upon twist of miscommunication is repeated over and again, especially in discussions of new or extreme religious views. The Internet remains a valuable source for doing such things as accessing primary religious documents and quickly contacting members of diverse new religious groups. But increasing patience and discrimination is necessary if one is to sift the grains of reliable information from the welter of sensationalistic or erroneous chaff piling-up in cyberspace.

### 2.2 Loss of Control Over Religious Materials

From the perspective of various new religions, one particularly troubling form of misinformation online, that represents a significant liability of the Internet, is the increased loss of control over their ideas. With few exceptions no group has been able to really maintain monopolistic control over the use and dissemination of their religious materials, scriptures, images, or whatever. But the Internet, as compared with the printed press, has greatly increased the ease with which renegades, heretics, and outright enemies can appropriate, alter, and misrepresent religious materials for their own purposes. In the face of such activities the Church of Scientology, for example, has fought a particularly long, hard, and expensive legal battle to secure the copyright of their materials on the net (see Frankel 1996; Grossman 1997; Peckham 1998). In many respects they have won the battle in the U.S. courts. But they have probably lost the war on the Internet, since the opponents of Internet censorship, who are legion, have made the very materials the church was seeking to control available on more sites, dispersed throughout the net, than any one organization or state can seek reasonably to even monitor, let alone control. The net is unlikely to be regulated by anything other than voluntary sanctions, and it is notoriously difficult to apply such sanctions to religious disputes. In the face of this fundamental fact of life on the net, the Canadian Radio, Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) has recently declared that it has no intention of even attempting to regulate the Internet (May 17, 1999).
2.3 Ersatz Community

Is it true that the Internet is giving rise to new kinds of communities? Is it helping to create communities free of the conventional constraints of social distinctions like class, race, and gender? This is a matter still under investigation, though the latest studies suggest that matters are more complex than first thought. As might be expected the utopian rhetoric of some commentators has been found wanting. Internet users appear to be as preoccupied with differences in class, race, and sex as others. In some cases users have devised ways of making these determinations when the information is not readily available, by identifying, for example, the cues provided in the texts exchanged across the net. In other cases, they have shown a proclivity to volunteer this information in order to socially ground their electronic conversations and provide the assurances of authenticity that are implicitly elicited in a medium so open to dissimulation (e.g., Donath 1999, Brukhalter 1999, O’Brien 1999).

Taken another way, though, these same findings suggest that people are striving to replicate real communities in cyberspace, as they understand them in the flawed space of ordinary society. Barry Wellman and Milena Guila (1999) argue that such is indeed the case, pointing to evidence of intimate and lasting relationships online, online reciprocity in relationships, the sense of attachment that develops to these networks, and the ways in which they tend to move beyond narrowly specialized interests to become more broadly supportive groups with an impact of other aspects of peoples’ lives.

While this may be true, other analysts remain sceptical. They argue that these computer-mediated connections are also extending the detrimental standardization, routinization, and instrumentalization of our relations with our own bodies and with other people that is associated already with the advent of previous technologies, from the automobile and highways to television (see e.g., McLuhan 1964; Ellul 1964; Marcuse 1966; Baudrillard 1970; Foucault 1979; Postman 1985). Are the limited kinds of interaction available through the net sufficient to replicate the kind, number, and quality of exchanges required to build a real sense of community. Establishing lasting commitments is a challenge these days, even in the context of more immediate and spatially and temporally uniform kinds of involvements (e.g., Holmes 1997; Willson 1997). The world of Internet communication strikes these critics as too one-dimensional and self-referential, and I tend to agree (Dawson and Hennebry 1999, 33):
The medium simultaneously and paradoxically tends to "compartmentalize populations" and physically isolate individuals, while also "homogenizing" them (Holmes, 1997: 16-17). As in the rest of our consumer culture, the market of the Internet tends to favor standardization with marginal differentiation. Consequently, with Holmes we find that dialogues on the net tend to be "quite transient and directionless, seldom acquiring a substantive enough history to constitute a political [or religious] movement" (Holmes, 1997: 18).

So while the Internet may augment the creation and spread of new religions by overcoming some of the constraints imposed by space, time, and the criteria of social stratification, in the process it may be working against the development of the bonds of true group identity. As Andrew Herman and John Sloop (1999) complain, the culture of the Internet itself, as well as the debates about it, are saturated with an implicit ideology of "romantic individualism." This ideology is not conducive to the ethos of self-sacrifice and submission to the will the group that is characteristic of many new religious movements.

2.4 One-Dimensionality

At the same time, it is possible that the Internet is not very supportive of true individualism and autonomy either, despite the ethos of romantic individualism. As Kinney, a student of gnosticism, observes, the net is not very compatible with the demands for solitary contemplation and social disengagement that most spiritual traditions prescribe for true spiritual development. Rather the Internet tends to distractedly involve its users in an endless series of "addictive facsimiles of life experiences" (1995, 774). In its very form, the world wide web inculcates a strong and almost reflex-like preference for heightened visual stimuli, rapid changes of subject matter, and diversity, combined with simplicity of presentation. Despite the veneer of active control and of interactivity, the intrinsic values of the web are much like those of television, with all its debilitating consequences for our habits of discipline and learning.

The one-dimensionality of computer-mediated communication comes across in another less easily defined way as well. Consider the following passage of conversation between the journalist Jeff Zaleski and Sheikh Kabir Edmund Helminski. Sheikh Helminski is the chief representative of the Mevlevi Sufi order in North America (the order renowned for its whirling
dervishes), and the creator and operator of the elaborate webpage of the Threshold Society, a non-profit educational organization affiliated with the Sufi order. At one point in the wide-ranging discussion between Zaleski and the Sheikh their attention turns to the effects of spending long hours transfixed before the glow of the computer screen (Zaleski 1997, 75):

JZ: ... I get kind of zoned out when I'm in front of the computer. I find it real hard to stay with myself -- not that that's ever easy.
SKEH: You sort of forget that you have a body.
JZ: Yeah.
SHEK: You forget that you are a living, breathing creature. You enter a mental dimension, a mechanical and mental, technical dimension that is very absorbing and somehow pulls you in. This is a very interesting phenomenon. I don't pretend to understand it, and I've been trying to understand it for about ten years. There's something about the screen -- its mesmerizing, and it absorbs you.
JZ: Absolutely.
SKEH: And yet I don't feel any better for it. I don't think working at the computer returns as much in the realm of quality as working in a garden, or painting, or playing music, or sitting down and talking to another human being. I don't believe that engaging in a conversation in the Internet on a keyboard brings us as much or as many levels of information and experience, touches our heart the way that being with human beings can touch our heart, and touch many levels.

There may not be anything terribly profound about these observations. But in delving into the surge of utopian and dystopian commentaries on the Internet and its effects these simple and central concerns are easily overlooked. Personally, I have never been much taken in by the lure of the screen, of computer generated reality. But clearly a great many others are, as Zaleski himself confesses and contemplates over and again in his book *The Soul of Cyberspace*. We are not sure what the possible psychological and social effects of extended time in cyberspace may be. But at least one extensive study, by Robert Kraut of Carnegie Mellon University, has shown that “people who spend even a few hours a week on line experience higher levels of depression and loneliness than they would have if they used the computer network less frequently” (as reported in the International Hearld Tribune, August 31, 1998, p. 1 and 13).
2.5 Blurring the Frames of Reality

In our increasingly mediated and rapidly changing world, the social conventions for discerning and framing the real and the unreal (or pretend) are under mounting tension (Altheide and Snow 1991; Chayko 1993). The frame of reality itself is shifting in ways that have yet to be accurately traced, and ways that may be outstripping our capacity to fully understand. With the advent of the popular mass media, magazines, books, films, radio, television, video games, and the technology of virtual reality, we are becoming far more adept than our ancestors could ever have imagined at moving in and out of different frames of reality -- between imagined and literal worlds. The difference is becoming increasingly ambiguous as elements of these worlds interpenetrate, as experiences and emotional states leak out of the virtual worlds into the real one and real needs and desires are integrated into virtual worlds (Chayko 1993). Sometimes, in a postmodern manner, this blurring of boundaries is intentional, as in the reflexive playfulness detected at some points in virtual rituals and the self-conception of groups like the Church ov MOO. But in many cases the element of playful agency and critical reflection is less apparent, and in extreme cases the blurring of frames could have disastrous results. What happens when the forbidden fantasies within some disturbed individuals gain form in the worlds of virtual reality, and the sensations cultivated in cyberspace leak out into and become confused with daily life? Is this question relevant to understanding what happened with Heaven's Gate (see Robinson 1997), or even more the high school shootings in Littleton, Colorado, which raised a furor over the negative influence of violent video games and web sites dedicated to Nazism, the construction of bombs, and so on?

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is difficult to form a clear picture of either the future of religion on the Internet or the impact of the Internet on religion -- its ideas, forms, practices, and social significance. We simply do not know enough about such crucial issues as the creation and maintenance of communities in cyberspace or the social and psychological implications of prolonged exposure to life in cyberspace. With growing interest in these and other related issues, it appears that worthwhile research has begun and soon we will be reaping the benefits. At present, however, it is far less clear that any specific research of note is being done on religion and the Internet. With things moving so rapidly in the
sociology of computer-mediated communication, though, these words may be
dated by the time they appear in print. All the same, the significance of
everything said in this essay, like all of the rhetoric and analyses induced by
the advent of the net, is qualified by one overriding fact: cyberspace is still
largely the preserve of a small elite. Everything said must be placed in a
larger context, the one Mel Watkins (1995, 9-10) sums up with the following
quip:

In today's "global village," half of the world's population has never
made a phone call, much less one between countries or continents.
In this "information age," only 20 percent of the world's population
have telephones -- to say nothing of fax machines, E-mail, etc. In
this "jet age" (actually, that term already sounds archaic), only 10
percent of Americans (to say nothing of Chinese, Indians, Africans,
etc.) have passports.

The really significant religious phenomenon in our world will continue to
be essentially premodern, let alone postmodern, in their form and functioning,
and for some time to come. But from now on every new religious movement
of any significance will have a presence on the Internet, and probably well
before we are aware it is of any significance. The Internet will be a crucial
forum for the promotion of religious change, innovation, conflict, and
dialogue, and it would be useful to have a better grasp of the intrinsic effects
of this medium on our social and religious life.
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