

A NEW FORUM FOR RELIGION: SPIRITUAL PILGRIMAGE ONLINE BY HEIDI CAMPBELL

Increasingly, the Internet is being seen as more than a space for information. It is also a space that is encouraging spiritual and social connections, providing new forms of spiritual exploration and religious observance. Following web links and joining online conversations on email lists might be compared to the idea of pilgrimage.

Pilgrimage is an ancient form of travel. It is a physical journey involving interaction with rituals, holy relics and sacred sites. Traditionally, pilgrims are people who, for a time, become travellers; leaving home in order to make their way to a sacred landscape. Though motivations differ, a pilgrimage is typically undertaken in order to encounter the Divine or a "holy realm" not accessible in an everyday context.

Online, new spiritual pilgrims are entering cyberspace in a quest for meaning and connection in the post-modern world.

The Internet allows individuals to pursue the sacred by introducing them to cyber-rituals, virtual relics and religious web-sites in their own homes. They are alone, but this search can bring them together with other seekers providing opportunities they would otherwise be separated from due to space-time limitations.

Historically, people went on pilgrimage with a set or fixed goal in mind. Online pilgrims often have more fluid aims, focusing on the process rather than a final destination, to see what the virtual environment might offer. Religious web-sites and online groups create new options for people searching for connection in a holistic way. Taking pilgrimage online can involve the altering and reformulating of ancient traditions or the creation of new forums for spiritual pursuit.

Rome has long been a site for pilgrimages, yet for many, travel there is still inaccessible. However, web technology surrounding the Pope's international visits has begun to provide an alternative way of pilgrimage. Laura Italiano in *Gimme that Online Religion* recounted her role in "launching the Pope into cyberspace"¹ during his 1995 visit to the USA. Besides offering traditional news stories, the web-site provided hypertexts of recent encyclicals and RealAudio recordings of papal blessings. Chat rooms allowed individuals to discuss his visit and an "Email the Pope" option meant users could send messages that were forwarded to the Holy See, from where came a response on the Pope's behalf.²

Italiano commented on the web-site's popularity saying, "People wanted to interact, to hear the Pope and hope the Pope could hear them... no other medium could offer this to them."³ The Internet enabled people to participate in the papal visit rather than just observe.

The Jewish saying "Next year in Jerusalem" is still a dream for some Jews, yet the Internet is making this journey easier. Individuals desiring to engage with Jewish faith and culture can do so on Virtual Jerusalem.⁴ Designed for English-speaking Jews, the site offers information on topics such as travel to Israel, kosher food and news. Special features include "Send a Prayer", allowing registered users to follow the custom of placing prayers in the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem by sending emails which are placed in the Wall on their behalf. The site also links individuals to Kotel Kam⁵ providing 24-hour live views of the Wall. Pictures of the Wall can be downloaded as screen savers; a virtual pilgrimage relic.

Avi Moskowitz created Virtual Jerusalem with the intent to "try and recreate what was offline. I wanted to be the Jewish world online, mirroring the physical community or improving on it."⁶ His hope was to enable Jews to re-engage with their faith by exploring relevant information housed in a central location.

In the twentieth century, the fastest growing arm of Protestant Christianity was Pentecostalism. Pilgrimages for many Pentecostals involve travelling to places of spiritual renewal to “encounter the Spirit”. A well-known pilgrimage site in the 1990s was the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship (TACF), made famous through the “Toronto Blessing”. In 1998 TACF became one of the first Christian web-sites to broadcast its services live online daily via RealAudio/Video technologies. Being present in Toronto when Revival Live Network was launched, I marvelled as the crowd was asked to turn towards the digital cameras and wave to the new “cyber-congregation”. As Pastor John Arnott said, “now you can come online with your computer and have a front row seat, hear and see what the Spirit is doing in Toronto.”

It is estimated that up to 4,000 people daily access the TACF web site.⁷ Many individuals have shared testimonies of the changes this access made in their spiritual lives as they travelled through cyberspace to participate in the services.

In this way, the Internet also facilitates new forms of online pilgrimage through individuals visiting web-sites called “cyberchurches” and participating in online Christian communities.

However questionable talk of the “cyberchurch” may seem, the fact remains that these types of expression of Church are increasing online in many forms: An example is The First Church of Cyberspace.⁸ Founded by Charles Henderson of the Presbyterian Church in New Jersey-USA, it is described as a consortium of ecumenical churches and individuals meeting online every Sunday evening at 9 p.m. EST for conversations and worship using Internet Relay Chat. Another is The Web Church⁹, offering religious information and prayer support by encouraging individuals to email in their prayer requests. Others, such as the Virtual Church of the Blind Chihuahua,¹⁰ allow individuals to interact with hypertext, images and sound, but lack the ability to interact with other virtual attendees. All of these online creations have no real-world equivalent beyond the computer screen to which the faithful can visit.

Another new form of online gathering is email-based Christian community. Individuals subscribe to email communities to be part of a group conversation on a specified topic, often guided by a “list moderator”. Within online religious communities, members often conceive of the interactions taking place as having a “spiritual” dimension. Here the Internet becomes a place where God directs the travels and the Spirit is given freedom to move through the network of the faithful so that the connections are understood as sacred. This is referred to as “spiritual networking”, where online relationships can be seen as divine connections, designed and initiated by God, forming an overlapping network of online and offline communities.

One example is The Online Church (OLC), a list for Christians to discuss personal struggles, ask questions related to the Scriptures and share prayer requests or praise reports. A unique feature is that the majority of members are visually impaired, giving them a common physical bond as well as spiritual. God is seen as the force that gathers individuals together and weaves them into a community. Members often use the word “family” to describe the group. As the list moderator commented, “I am amazed how the Lord has caused the list to grow and to expand into a truly electronic church. I like the fact that OLC is more of a support group for believers than a place where Christians come to debate and argue.”¹¹ Members see themselves as having been brought out of the world into cyberspace to support and care for one another by God. Online community extends members' understanding of the “body of Christ” to include online relationships and many view their online involvement as central to their personal and spiritual lives.

These 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.

An American, **Heidi Campbell** currently lives in Scotland pursuing a PhD at the University of Edinburgh in Computer-mediated Communications and Practical Theology. For more information on her research, consult her website: www.ed.ac.uk/~ewcv24/

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¹ New Jersey Remembers the Pope's Visit. <http://www.nj.com/popepage/>

² Email the Pope. <http://www.nj.com/popepage/email.html>

³ Laura Italiano, "Gimme that Online Religion." Columbia Journalism Review, Jan/Feb 1996, Vol. 34 No. 5, p. 36.

⁴ Virtual Jerusalem.com. <http://www.virtualjerusalem.com/>

⁵ Kotel Kam. <http://kotelkam.com/free.htm>

⁶ Bonnie Rothman Morris, "Surfing Their Way to the Holy Land." The New York Times on the Web, 28 January 1999, <http://www.nytimes.com/library/tech/99/01/circuits/articles/28jeru.html> (accessed 28 January 1999)

⁷ Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship. <http://www.tacf.org/>

⁸ The First Church of Cyberspace. <http://www.godweb.org/>

⁹ The WebChurch – The WorldWide Virtual Church from Scotland. <http://www.webchurch.org>

¹⁰ The Virtual Church of the Blind Chihuahua. <http://www.dogchurch.org/>

¹¹ OLC email post, sent Wed, 3 Jun 1998 09:06:20, subject: watching and reading