Virtual Churches, Participatory Culture, and Secularization

Stefan Gelfgren

Stefan.Gelfgren@humlab.umu.se

This article aims at interpreting how the Church is transforming when moving into three-dimensional virtual worlds. It is however particularly important to relate churches in virtual worlds to an overall changing role of Christianity. What is happening in virtual worlds is too often considered as separated from the physical world, but here it is argued that virtual churches are a part of a general process of religious transformation. Researchers, such as Mia Lövheim (Lövheim 2008) and Peter Fischer-Nielson (Fischer-Nielsen 2009), have made similar

interpretations. They also point out the need for a more balanced view on religion online,

moderating ideological claims of how the Internet will change religious faith and practices. This

article aims to nuance views of the relation between religion and the Net, by adding a historical

perspective.

The history of religious use of the Internet stretches back to the early 1980s. Back then

religious computer-mediated communication was mainly limited to discussion lists, bulletin

boards and chat Christian websites emerged in the mid-1990s. In 1994 "The First Church of

Cyberspace" was created, trying to establish an online congregation. In early 2000 there were

different attempts to create three dimensional online churches and when Second Life launched in

2003 it didn't take long before one could see Christian initiatives. For a more detailed history of

religious use of the Net, see Heidi Campbell's *Exploring Religious Community Online* (2005a).

Today, churches are beginning to focus their online activities into social media.

However, in Douglas Estes' book *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World* he

early on states that virtual churches have a special potential. "This type of church [churches in

virtual worlds] is unlike any church the world has ever seen. It has the power to break down

social barriers, unite believers from all over the world, and build the kingdom of God with a

widow's mite of financing. It is a completely different type of church from any the world has

ever seen" (Estes 2009). Other books (of more devotional, practical character) dealing with

Church and Internet often emphasize how the Net, and in the last years more specifically social

media, give previously never seen possibilities for churches to connect to people. For instance in

The Blogging Church the authors write: "Imagine a world where everyone has a voice, access to

the marketplace of ideas, and the freedom to say whatever he or she want. With blogs, that world is here." They also state that "as blogs continue to spread through organizations and popular culture, people are looking for a new kind of openness from the institutions that dominate their daily lives. A new conversation has begun ... [and] more and more people are communicating online in a brand new way" (Bailey and Storch 2007). Clearly, some church representatives have high expectations regarding the usefulness of digital media in general, and social media in particular.

Churches obviously see the potential in using Internet for reaching out to people and for building new relations, especially when it is said we are living in an age of secularization – including a declining role for institutionalized Christianity. And from the early days of the Internet, different religious and Christian actors have used digital information technology for spreading and practicing their faith (Campbell 2005). What is of interest here is how the fact churches establish in virtual worlds also tend to transform them.

As the quotations above by Estes and Bailey and Storch indicate, it is as if technology, isolated from the rest of society and its inhabitants, itself gives these opportunities.[1] The question is: Has the world really never experienced anything similar like the Internet? Are churches in virtual worlds something the world never has seen before? According to Christopher Helland "religion on the Internet is a unique phenomenon." "Due to its massive online presence, it challenges traditional academic theories that link the secularization process with developments in

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[1] In a forthcoming article, "Media for communicating the Gospel: Comparing aims and hopes of 19th century and post millennial Christianity," in *Digital Faith and Culture: Perspectives, Practices and Futures*, eds. Pauline Cheong, Charles Ess, Stefan Gelfgren, Peter Fisher-Nielsen (forthcoming), I'm dealing with expectations connected to the use of Internet in relation to Christian mission.

modernity and technology" (Helland 2007). In the introduction to a special issue on religion in virtual worlds the editor Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, emphasizes similarly how new virtual churches are "demanding new scientific methods and methodologies in order to analyze the likewise new realm of religious beliefs and utterances in this virtual space" (Radde-Antweiler nd).

This article argues that churches in virtual worlds should not be treated as something completely separated from what is happening in the rest of society, and these churches can and should be analyzed along similar interpretive models as Christianity as a whole. The development in virtual worlds should be seen in the light of contemporary transformations within the religious sphere. A lot of research has been done on virtual churches, mainly from an ethnographic approach, answering questions such as what are people doing there and how their online life relates to the rest of their lives (Hutchings 2010), how are Christian faith and practices carried out in the churches (Simon Jenkins 2008), how do different denominations and religious affiliations differ from each other (Jacobs 2007), how do online churches affect their offline counterparts (Campbell 2007), and so on. The aim of this article is to relate the phenomenon of virtual churches to both a wider contemporary and historical context.

On one hand it is easy to say that virtual churches are unique (and in some ways they indeed are) – the technological complexity, the speed, or the widespread reach of the Internet has never been seen before. On the other hand it is possible to compare what is happening on a societal level, on and through the Net, with other processes in contemporary society and throughout history. This paper will focus on issues such as changing power structures,

collaboration and participation through the use of information technology, today and in the past. The question of how technology shapes and transforms the religious sphere will not be dealt with explicitly. This article will not seek to decide if technology itself changes religious expressions, as for instance Walter Ong would claim (Ong 1982), or if religious actors actively negotiate their use of technology, claimed by Heidi Campbell (Campbell 2010).

The article is related to an ongoing research project called "Pinocchio goes to church: The religious life of avatars," focusing on the construction and perception of holiness in virtual worlds. This article is written in an early phase of the project and gives an outline of issues dealt with. It is not a specific case study but an attempt to trace tendencies in contemporary Christianity. When preparing for, and in a nearly phase of the project, the author spent almost two years in the virtual world of Second Life to get an overview of the world and church initiatives in general. In the early stages the study was open ended, but in coming phases a selection will be made and focus more thoroughly on a limited amount of churches and other Christian initiatives. During this period the author visited many different Christian sites, talked to people and participated in a variety of activities. This article summons up tendencies and findings based upon that experience, drawing up structures of succeeding deeper studies. This study is mainly concerned with the construction of places affiliated with Christian activities. How are they designed? What kind of ideas are build into the constructions? Are there similarities or differences with traditional analogous churches? And how to interpret these churches and sites in relation to contemporary and historical processes of religious transformation?

Secularization, technology and religious transformations

Religious faith and practices have changed many times throughout history – due to an intertwining mix of technological, economic, political, scientific, and other causes. Religious transformation is a complex process difficult to narrow down to one universal narrative, and is often quite impossible to reduce to explanations of a simple matter of cause and effect.

One example of religious transformation often mentioned in relation to information technology is the 16th century Reformation. It can be related to irregularities within the Catholic Church, scientific discoveries and beliefs in humanity during the Renaissance, fighting over economical and political power and many other factors. One important reason for the spread and implementation of reforming ideas is the use of (at that time) modern information technology – the printing technique. Ideas originating from Luther were printed, distributed and adopted. People were challenged to have a personal relation to God through reading the Bible in the vernacular. Subsequently the Church was divided into one Catholic and different Protestant churches (Eisenstein 1980). A similar complex history can be seen regarding the 19th century so called Evangelical revival in Europe. Itinerant preachers and free churches made use of more efficient printing techniques, improved roads and railways and broke into and undermined the established parochial infrastructure. In these two cases the technology of the day played important roles in transforming beliefs and practices – both intentionally and unintentionally.

There are more examples to develop, but this is not the place. One can however briefly mention examples such as the codex and the Church in the Roman Empire, televangelism in the

States, use of radio in Latin America and contemporary Pentecostalism, video and screening technology in mega churches, and so on. Use of technology can in other words affect how religious faith and practices are perceived and performed.

Describing and interpreting religious transformation is often done through a secularization perspective. Early sociologists such as Karl Marx, Auguste Comte, and Max Weber embedded an idea about scientific progression and religious decline into the narrative of an ongoing modernity. Religious ideas were considered destined to dwindle away. In the so-called secularization thesis, the idea of religious decline is intertwined with the idea of a modern society.

In recent decades the secularization theory has been widely debated and questioned (Berger et al. 1999; Swatos and Olson 2000). In his monumental work of moral philosophy, Charles Taylor questions any kind of, what he calls, subtraction stories – that religious faith is disappearing due to the process of modernity. He only focuses on the offline worlds and there he sees a growing pluralisation and the possibility to choose one's individual faith (Taylor 2007). He uses an expression from sociologist Grace Davie, "believing without belonging" (Davie 1994), to explain the paradoxical relation between a declining role for religion on an institutional level, and the role religious beliefs play in the ordinary life of people. Taylor also claims that there are no longer fixed boundaries between different traditions, and that new forms of religious expressions surface (Taylor 2007). He is not alone in making this sort of interpretation. In an influential work the sociologists Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead prefer to use the concept of a "subjectivisation thesis" to describe the condition of contemporary religiosity. Heelas and

Woodhead emphasis the "subjective turn" of modern society due to which religion has become subjective or optional; people are free to choose their own mix of religious faiths (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). Instead of being mere consumers of faith, people have to a larger extent been empowered to collaborate and also been given the opportunity to be a part of their churches and congregations. The religious market has in other words grown and become more differentiated. This article claims, as mentioned, that models for interpreting the role of religion in the offline world, also are relevant for what is happening in virtual worlds as well.

In a more pluralistic situation the different actors have struggled and sometimes adapted to the market situation too, in order to fight for survival or to keep their relevance. Often formats have been imported from popular culture – usually with the argument of keeping young people within the realm of the church. The 19th century Evangelical movements started soccer teams and brass bands, published pious books similar to modern novels, threw hosted dinner and tea parties, and adopted other popular cultural forms, with the aim of attracting people in an age of a declining Anglican Church (Brown 1997). In the 1960s, Christianity was profoundly influenced by contemporary youth counter culture. Christian cafés, rock concerts, underground newspapers, modern Bible translations, and open air festivals appeared and were used to promote the word of God – now in a more appealing (amusing) and competitive format (McLeod 2010). Similar tendencies are obvious in the virtual churches here studied.

As mentioned, technology has played a role (among other factors) and can be clearly seen in transforming religious faith and practices throughout history. That is the case today as well, and can be clearly seen when looking on how religion is transforming in virtual worlds. In order

to understand what is currently taking form, concepts such as *pluralisation* (due to new emerging forms of religious expressions), *competition* on, and *adaptation* to a market situation, and the *subjectivisation* of religious faith, are important for the interpretation. These tendencies are seen in the offline world as shown above, but I would say the trend is even stronger and more apparent in virtual worlds which make them interesting objects of study.

Churches in virtual worlds

How do churches and Christian communities in virtual worlds fit into this general pattern? Or do they at all? It is obvious that Second Life, in this case, encourages new forms in the conduct of religious faith and practices, mixing traditions and expressions otherwise usually not compatible. It must be noted that responses to virtual churches are varied and ambivalent within the Christian sphere, often depending upon traditions and theology (Hutchings 2007). Some churches are founded as an outreach for "real life" churches, and others build upon the initiative of pastors or priests who want to try something different. Other churches and congregations are to a large extent formulated and built by people outside traditional church formations in the physical world.

It is difficult to know how many churches there are in Second Life, and even to know what places to label as churches. There are churches built as a digital representation of a "real" church, others are merely places built to function as sites to gather people for socializing or reflection, and some churches are just a building with no other meaning apart from being an artifact. In my personal Second Life inventory I have approximately 70 different landmarks

referring to Christian sites collected mainly during the pilot study for this project; Tim Hutchings

mentions in his thesis that he has 106 landmarks to places referring to themselves as churches

(Hutchings 2010).

Fig. 1 Church as a digital representation

Fig. 2   A more imaginative place for Christian community

There are different ways to characterize how churches in Second Life relate to an ongoing process of secularization, or what kind of concepts one should use when interpreting transformations of contemporary Christian churches. Three concepts have been chosen for this article in order to highlight general tendencies, relating historical to contemporary changes: "dissolving traditions," "market adaptation" and "emphasis on relations."

Dissolving traditions

The idea that the Internet undermines traditional structures is almost an "established fact," both regarding the profane and the religious sphere. It is intertwined into interpretations of various forms of digital culture. The reason, as sociologist Manuel Castells claims, is that "the Internet is a communication medium that allows, for the first time, the communication of many to many, in chosen time, on a global scale. … [W]e have now entered a new world of communication." (Castells 2001).

The truth is probably more nuanced, but questions about authority and traditions are certainly raised by new ways of communication. A short overview illustrates how churches and communities can be established in Second Life.

One of the largest Christian congregations in Second Life is centered around the Anglican Cathedral. The cathedral and its congregation are related to the traditional and worldwide Anglican Communion, but this particular church was founded as a, private unauthorized

initiative.[2] The church was originally run by lay people – some of them theology students. Another church, here called The Trinity Church,[3] was established and run by a person studying for a position in the Swedish (former state) Church. In another, now finished, church project, the aim was to build a Goth inspired church, bridging Goth culture and Christianity. The project was driven by a layman with support from his "real" church diocese, with a desire to reach the young generation. In these three cases digital representations were created to look like traditional churches made of brick and mortar. The Trinity Church held services according to the handbook of the Swedish Church. Close to the Church, a monastery was build in which it was possible to rent cells for living and contemplation. Inside the Church there was an organ functioning as a jukebox, playing your choice of music – ranging from classic to rock and rap music. Outside a memorial garden was situated where it was possible to rent a place to commemorate a beloved friend or relative. In the Goth church the aesthetics was combined by a ghostly dark club setting and a traditional Victorian style church. In other cases, such as the community of Praying People, a site is build by private initiatives for a congregation where it can gather for praying and fellowship – with no explicit relation to offline churches.

These churches are just a few examples, but demonstrate that many churches and congregations are established with a blurred relation to traditional boundaries, related to what sociologist Brenda E. Brasher claims, that "individuals with no tie to any particular religious organization or group are the pioneers of online religion" (Brasher 2001). As mentioned, some churches are built as digital representations (like mere duplicates) of physical ones. However in

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[2] http://slangcath.wordpress.com.

[3] In the research project I have so far chosen to keep churches and sites anonymous.

many cases the organizational structures within these copies are altered in a way to undermine the traditional relationship between institution, the ordained clergy and the parish. Traditionally a church is hierarchically structured with the clergy in front of the parishioners, often in a centrally placed pulpit, placing the pews in a bus-like setting. This order implies a hierarchy, a sender-consumer relation between the leader and the visitors – in other words between the producer and the consumer (Drane 2008).

Fig. 3 The Anglican Cathedral – an unofficial branch of an established denomination, founded by private initiative.

Fig. 4 The Trinity Church

Through the possibility to establish churches on a "freelance basis" previously

established boundaries became vague. Virtual churches have the potential to be, and probably

are, user created and user centered to a higher degree than churches in the physical world. When

free churches within the 19th century Evangelical revival in, for example, Sweden and England

started to use itinerant preachers and so called colporteurs, they did this to have a more popular

contact point to common people than the clergies of the State Church had. Chapels were erected

undermining the structure of the church and hymns were made more appealing through the use

of popular melodies, thus claiming that the devil should not have all the best tunes (Gelfgren

2003).

Fig. 5 Monastery close to Trinity Church

Many of the churches and congregations of Second Life also have more open milieus, inviting the visitors to a more participatory approach to what is going on during service. Instead of pews in rows, pillows or comfortable armchairs in a circle form the place for worship, and thereby also visualizing the whole idea of the participatory culture of Internet (compare with digital media scholars such as Henry Jenkins (Henry Jenkins 2008) or Howard Rheingold (Rheingold 2002). There are several places for Christian communities which are built in more imaginative ways, using the potential of the media, with open walls, or in the open air, converging different media channels, also implying a more participatory attitude toward the people who attend the services.

Fig 6. Space built with an open, participatory structure compared to traditional pews.

Market adaptation

The diverse religious situation of today can be described as an open market, and in a virtual world such as Second Life the openness and competitiveness is even more observable. Since everybody has the possibility to be completely anonymous through their digital representation (their so-called avatar) nobody has to be in a specific church due to previously established obligations, social pressure or other forms of forcing frameworks as sometimes in "real life." Anyone is free to choose which church or congregation to attend. Of course a Methodist is probably more likely to try a Methodist church for example, but s/he is open to move on if what sought for is not found. People use the possibility to try different ways to express their religious faith. This situation, in combination with a medium in which almost

anything is possible to construct, is probably one important reason to why new types of attractions are constructed in association to many churches. Another reason is to "speak with the same lucidity using our cultural language of media that the Levite priests did when they translated the Law for the people," as the authors of *The Wired Church 2.0* write (Wilson and Moore 2008). In other words; digital media can be used to translate the Christian message into a language contemporary people understand, for example through mashing objects and practices from the profane sphere with practices within the church. When viewing churches in Second Life it is almost as if any means seem to be acceptable to use when trying to attract adherents. In addition the entrepreneurial spirit is often very strong.

Fig 7. Another space built with an open, participatory structure.

Some churches have whole areas, almost like amusement parks, connected to them. The Trinity Church had a skybox with places just for socializing; with features such as a bar with games, the possibility to go fishing, rent a motorcycle for a ride and so on. Linked to a large American church, The Church of Christ, is an area with a rollercoaster and also a fully sized racetrack for motorcycles and racing cars. It is also possible to play pool and try hang gliding and so on. In their large "amusement park" there is also a night club, Club Heaven on Earth, with proper settings and equipment for a good night out – complete with dance floor, strobing light, bar, DJ booth, and so on. The Christian Goth church also had a night club with a Gothic theme. In Second Life there are also another Christian nightclubs, hosting clubbing events several times a week, with the aim of providing a safe and friendly club, based upon Christian values. One of the first clubs, Down with Jesus, had in the beginning, a couple of years ago, the specific purpose, according to their group description, to provide a venue for clubbing in a Christian atmosphere as an alternative to the usual clubs. After a while they expanded to have Bible studies and prayer groups as well.

Fig. 8 Rollercoaster

Fig. 9 Nightclub

Similar things were seen also during the 19th century. Churches and denominations tried

to attract new adherents through new and more amusing activities. Special activities emerged for

young men and women, such as different parties, music evenings, picnics and sports. Often these

activities had the double aim of both attracting people and to gather money for missionary

activities in foreign countries. Historian Callum Brown labels this whole enterprise as part of a

"salvation industry" (Brown 2009) and the growing market for "religious leisure" (Brown 1997).

Related to the process of adapting to the market online are various innovative ways to illustrate and mediate Christian faith and doctrines. For example, The Trinity Church had a digital version of a rosary with clickable beads, whispering prayers when touching them. At one site, there is what can be called a river of praying. If you pray, inserting a specific phrase in the chat bar, a dried up river starts flowing, illustrating the power of praying. On another island it was possible to walk through a text-based version of John Bunyan's 17th century classic text *The Pilgrim's progress* (Bunyan 2009), having you decide which way to go in the path of life.
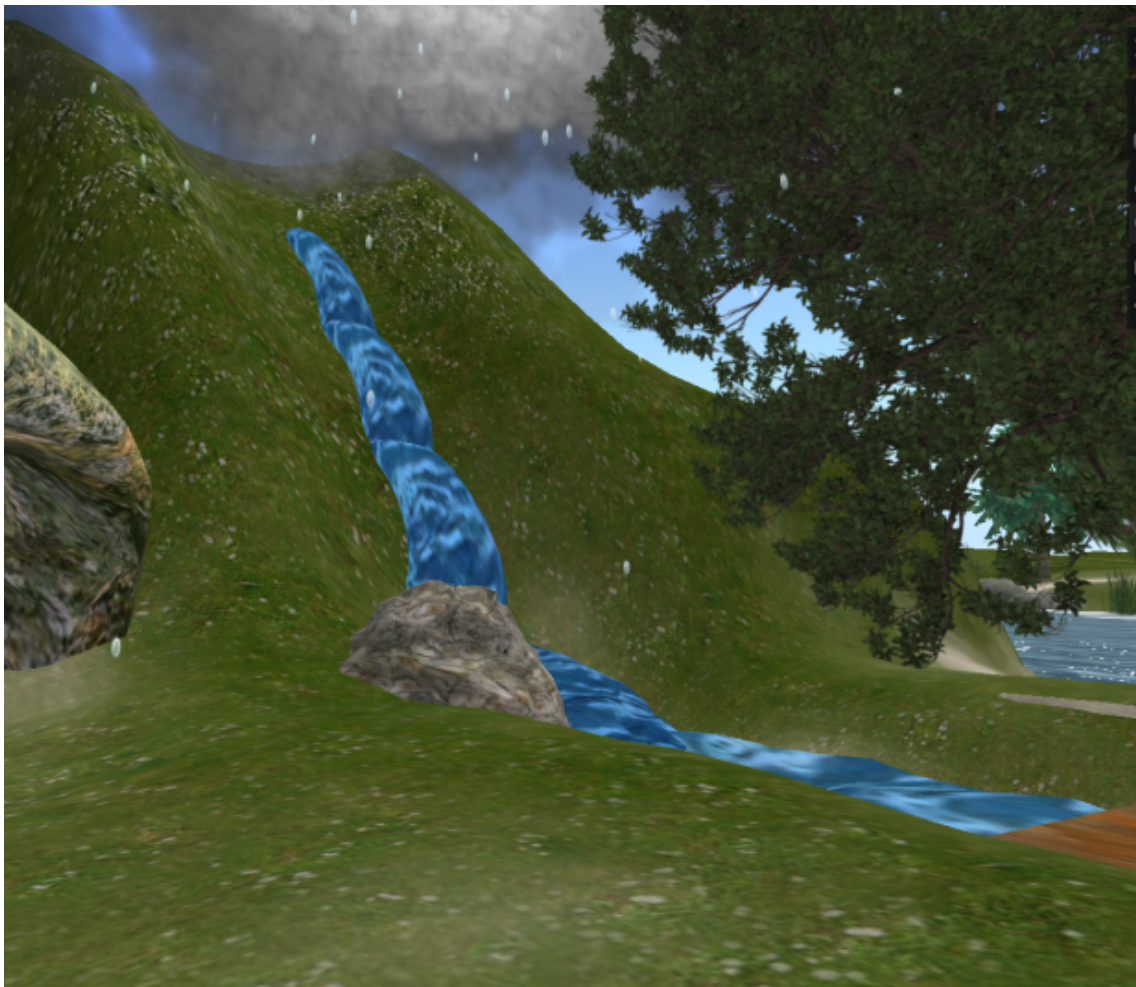

Fig. 10 River of Praying

A virtual world such as Second Life is an open market where the different actors compete for the attention of the residents. Given the opportunities available in SL, the churches also use the potential of making and providing various forms of amusing activities. As mentioned above, similar tendencies have been seen previously through history, and the notion of "religious leisure" has been used to characterize these trends – even if the scale of what is possible to do is completely different in virtual worlds. If a church wants a rollercoaster, a river, or a monastery, they can get it at almost no cost.

Emphasis on relations

The participatory culture of the Net (particularly what is considered web 2.0 or virtual worlds) is widespread in the churches and congregations of Second Life, and can be related to both the undermining of traditions and the tendency toward amusement, mentioned above. This is not a phenomenon solely isolated to the Net. There are examples of how the participatory culture of the Internet influences offline churches, something clear and intentional within the so called Emerging Church. The possibility for the members of a congregation to participate and build relations, as on Facebook and blogs, is something churches often see as positive (Gibbs and Bolger 2006). The relational character of the Net is also seen as a model for how to conduct church (Friesen 2009; Rice 2009). Coming together and spending time with fellow Christians for help and support in everyday life, is a well-known strategy especially within revivalist movements, and is also sustained through their theology. One key issue within the 17th century Pietist revival is the notion of the congregation of true believers. Through so-called conventiclers

Christians met to study the word of God, but also for communion and to socialize. Socializing among fellow Christians has throughout the history of church been a way to strengthen faith and to build a shared identity within the congregation. Once again similar things are happening in Second Life but it is taken some steps further, probably related to the affordances of the media. Various forms of entertaining activities are already mentioned above.

There are also whole Christian communities where it is possible stay on a permanent basis. Within the vicinity of The Church of Christ is a camp where it is possible to rent a place for living, and where it is possible to spend your everyday (second) life. Around The Trinity Church, medieval style houses were open for residents to rent. Another Christian island has small cabins to rent on a weekly basis around the main building. There is one sim resembling a beach resort, where there are Christian cafés and other places for recreation and socialization, and so on. In other words there are several places – from small establishments to whole islands – devoted to Christian friendship.

Fig. 11 Café

Fig. 12 Beach resort

At the same time many services end with a time of fellowship outside the Church, in the parish house or a nearby café, or similar. Instead of focusing on conducting traditional services many gatherings focus more on Bible studies, prayer meetings and round table discussions. Christian life in Second Life is more about sharing and community, then "consuming" a service, held by an appointed leader, in church, at a specific time, all along the lines of the web 2.0-concept (see also fig. 6 and 7).

To understand and empirically prove this noticeable shift in focus and the experience thereof, more systematic studies will be conducted, but the trend is noticeable. One preliminary hypothesis is that it is 1) related to the features of the media; 2) to the needs and demands people are experiencing today; and 3) to the more participatory and relational culture of the Internet we

are living in today. People no longer tend to go to church just to be a cog in a passive machine –

and in the market-driven economy of Second Life people are given the opportunity to participate

and become a producer of their own religious experience.

Conclusion

Churches on the Internet and in virtual worlds develop characteristics related to the

affordances of the media, but without relating these churches to an overall changing role of

religion in society the interpretation become unbalanced.

This article claims that transformations of churches and Christian faith online in virtual

worlds must be seen in the light of both contemporary and historical contexts. The initial

quotation from *SimChurch* is just one typical example of how unrealistic views and expectations

are connected to churches in virtual worlds, built upon the idea that virtual churches are

something separated from the offline world. Churches and Christian communities in virtual

worlds are, this article has argues, rather closely related to and dependent on what is happening

in the physical world. Viewing the "real" and the virtual world as separate just blurs

interpretations. Virtual churches reflect what is going on in the offline world, and what is taking

place on Internet influences "real life" churches (a study yet to be made). Having said that, it is

possible to see how current trends are stronger, more emphasized and faster in virtual worlds.

One tendency, on- and offline, is toward an increasing degree of participation.

Second Life is an environment open for any initiatives and experiments. People

experiment with roles and identities, and constructions can be made without physical or

traditional restrictions. This leads to a highly pluralistic situation where the different actors have

to compete and consequently adapt to the rules of the market. Similar tendencies have been seen

previously in history too, and is claimed to be one reason Christianity is still reasonably prolific

in the US (Finke 1992). In Second Life this aspect is obvious to see.

The mix of religious faith and practices Taylor mentions as a characteristic ingredient of

contemporary religious life is strong in Second Life. Different Christian and non-Christian

traditions can be, and are, mixed in virtual churches. Of course this differs among different

churches (Helland 2005) – depending on for example if the church is, or claims to be, an

outreach from a church in the analogous world; the church's view on traditions and institutions;

or if the church is founded upon private "freelancing" initiatives. Once again mixing of traditions

can be seen outside virtual worlds, but it is obvious to see and experience so to speak, inside the

world. There it is technically possible to build churches and assemble artifacts without traditional

constraints, and it is possible to "fill" the churches with any sort of activities. Doctrinal

limitations are not always considered. They might be seen as an obstacle in the analogous

worlds, but in the virtual world traditions are, to a larger extent, not as decisive. As a

consequence thereof, traditional boundaries are unquestionably dissolved.

Traditionally the concept of secularization has frequently been connected to either the

separation of church and state, or a decline of religious beliefs associated with the

disenchantment of the world. Nonetheless, it is quite apparent that the development of modern

society has led to a diversification of religious faith and expressions. Consequently, it is up to the

individual person to choose religious affiliation (compare with, for example, Lövheim 2005). In

the so called real world people can be caught in a restrictive and controlling framework, making it sometimes difficult to select freely among available alternatives. The open and anonymous world (between the avatars)of the Internet makes it potentially possible for anyone to search and maybe find what he or she is looking for, a fact supporting what Heelas and Woodhead call the subjectivisation thesis.(Heelas and Woodhead 2005) Representatives for different churches have the possibility to pick and mix when constructing Christian churches and sites, with loose relations to churches in the physical world.

One highly interesting feature of virtual churches is the return to collective expressions of faith. Contemporary secularization theory often stresses individualization and/or privatization of religious commitment as a tendency in modern society. As religious conviction has become voluntary and based on individual zeal, faith has become private and something people tend to hide away from public life. Contrary to the concept of individualization and privatization, one can see how people in Second Life come together for community and sharing faith. There are examples of how whole islands are built as communities for Christian fellowship. Faith and religious conviction are individual, maybe also private, but believing is not something you do only hidden in your private sphere, on your own. Second Life can be a media used by individual persons use to find others of similar interest (compare with the concept of networked individualism by Wellman et al 2003).

Once again it is possible to re-use Grace Davie's widely accepted concept of "believing without belonging" as a phrase to describe the state of churches – in virtual worlds as well in the physical world. You can evidently belong to a church on the Internet, but the notion of belonging

is somewhat distorted compared to what it usually stands for when talking about churches and denominations. It is quite difficult even to know if a specific virtual church will exist in the near future. The very same can be said about whole virtual worlds. You can never know how sustainable they will prove to be. What does "belonging" then mean? As an open market, driven by the people participating in-world, virtual worlds can be seen as means for supporting individual participation, and also for negotiating expressions and content in contemporary religious life.

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