Faith in the net: towards the creation of digital networks of religious acknowledgement and recognition

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Abstract: Undoubtedly, the technological revolution in information and communications causing major changes in citizens' social interactions. The new reticular rationality offers the possibility of shaping, developing, and strengthening social networks and virtual communities. All of them facilitate the creation of new interactive spaces, new social collectives promoting citizenship and that, from different social fields and levels of experience, articulate and streamline processes of production, circulation and appropriation of new symbolic products. Such products contribute not only to generating new sources of knowledge but, above all, to strengthening processes of citizen interaction. In such processes, the field of media, religiosities and socio-cultural processes are strategically intertwined. In this context, experiences of civic religiosity find in the potential generated by the global network, new possibilities of interaction and religious recognition. Also new forms and spaces to share plural options of faith and socio-religious practices that make sense of the existence of cybernauts. This text is divided into three parts: First, critically contextualizes the global phenomenon of social networks. Second, it makes an approximation to some experiences of digital networks of religious recognition from Latin America. Finally, raises some questions that arise from such virtual practices.

Keywords: Internet, social networks, religious digital networks, social practices and social interaction, recognition

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Foi dans le réseau. Vers la création de réseaux numériques de reconnaissance religieuse

Résumé: La révolution technologique de l'information et de la communication continue de provoquer de grands changements dans les interactions sociales des citoyens. La nouvelle rationalité réticulaire offre la possibilité de façonner, développer et renforcer les réseaux sociaux et les communautés virtuels. Tous facilitent la création de nouveaux espaces interactifs, de nouveaux groupes sociaux promouvant la citoyenneté qui, à partir de différents champs sociaux et niveaux d'expérience, articulent et dynamisent les processus de production, de circulation et

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d'appropriation de nouveaux produits symboliques. De tels produits contribuent puissamment, non seulement à générer de nouvelles sources de connaissances, mais surtout à renforcer les processus d'interaction citoyenne. Dans ces processus, le domaine des médias, des religiosités et des processus socioculturels sont stratégiquement interconnectés. Dans ce contexte, les expériences de religiosité citoyenne trouvent dans le potentiel généré par le réseau mondial, de nouvelles possibilités d'interaction et de reconnaissance religieuse. Il existe également de nouveaux moyens et espaces pour partager des options plurielles de foi et de pratiques socio-religieuses qui donnent un sens à l'existence des internautes. Ce texte est divisé en trois parties: Premièrement, il contextualise de manière critique le phénomène global des réseaux sociaux. Deuxièmement, il fait une approximation de certaines expériences de réseaux numériques de reconnaissance religieuse d'Amérique latine. Enfin, il soulève quelques questions qui découlent de ces pratiques virtuelles.

Mots-clés: Internet, réseaux sociaux, réseaux numériques religieux, pratiques sociales et interaction sociale, reconnaissance

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Introduction

A brief assessment of the early 21st century gives us a hint as to how the emergence of the world's information net, the Internet, has radically altered society. Internet has generated a real '*cultural revolution*' (Castells, 2010), perhaps the greatest revolution in information and communication ever, and it has done so in the shortest possible period of time, with deep repercussions in all social orders. The *information and communications technologies* (*ICT's*) associated to the Net are producing conspicuous transformations in the most diverse and unusual spheres of human life. While doing so, it has changed deeply our cultural communication habits through computers; it has destabilized the whole social framework from the basis of the most simple and natural social interactions and relationships to the generation, production, and diffusion of information and knowledge at a global scale, with unforeseeable effects vis-à-vis pluralism and the quality of information. It has been so much so that some scholars have ironically suggested to divide human history into two new periods: BG and AG (before Google and after Google) (Piscitelli, 2008), in order to point out the enormity of today's reshaping of everybody's socio-cultural daily life.

Despite of all the questions prompted by the inclusion/exclusion problem within the "*global information society*", otherwise known as the '*digital divide'*, Internet has triggered an environmental media effect of autonomy and a "freeing of speech" which provides anyone who is connected with the possibility of exercising freedom of expression via the more or less autonomous production of meaning in the net. It has also generated the possibility of cooperative, collaborative work producing meaning, of still unforeseen dimensions, holding out against the hegemonizing, totalizing pretentions of competitive accumulation practiced by those who have been

known as the "*the lords of the air: telepolis and the third environment*" (Echeverría, 1999). In this sense, it should be acknowledged "information and communication have always been vectors of dominant powers, of alternative powers, of resistance and social changes" (Castells, 2010, p. 42). *Telepolis*, thus, becomes an autonomous social structure with its own identity, dynamics, drive, and above all, with an unforeseen capacity to generate new types of social relationships which foster and bring about a new media environment: the '*cyberculture'* (Lévy, 2007; Escobar, 2005).

In this new cybercultural context, and over the last decade, one of Internet's most notorious contributions to the social structure has been the coming into existence and multiplication of "*social networks*" or "digital communication networks". According to recent data, 940 million people worldwide are connected to this type of networks. Among the ten most popular social networks in 2010, in order of acceptance and number of users, we find: *YouTube*, *Facebook, Twitter, Yahoo News, Hi5, MySpace*, *Menéame, Metroflog, Badoo, and Orkut*. Of course, this is neither a unique nor definitive list since each country has its most popular and preferred networks; for example, *Orkut* is quite popular in Brazil and India, *Tuenti* in Spain, *Hi5* in Mexico and Central America, while in China the preferred network is *Ozone*. Only a few examples are mentioned here, but we should keep in mind all along that many global, local, elitist, popular, or citizen networks could be added to the list, all of them in full ferment (Fotolog, Flickr, Linkedin, Xing, Plurk, InterNation, Mixi, LunaStorm, etc.), not to speak of the *Blogs,* the cooperative networks in Internet, and all the wide range of "*virtual communities*" being created every day in the digital space.

Social networks in the web exert their main impact on social contemporary relationships and are closely associated to the benefits offered by cyberspace, such as pluri-ubiquity, simultaneity, tactility, and portability; however, they set out, at the same time, paradoxical relationships among inhabitants thus reshaping systems, social spaces, the production of knowledge, and original and complex modes of intrapersonal communication; and they do so in such a way that, very swiftly, they have made possible new ways of interaction and communication. Therefore, beyond the strictly technological factors of interconnection, what really matters here are the persons involved, who are historically placed and interact, exchange and produce new meanings among themselves. "The particularities of this sociability mediated by computers are established in the intersection between human and technological features" (Fragoso, 2009, p.13). Now, these new forms of sociability in the digital space have been capitalized, originally and innovatively, not only by traditional mass media (i.e. press, radio, and television, since they all have their own *networks on line*), but also by a large number of social movements, groups, associations, churches, companies, political parties, organizations, and institutions of all sorts. In this way, a superior capacity for social and political organization is reached, different from the one traditionally used in social space.

By the end of this century's first decade, we find ourselves in '*a new reticular rationality*' brought about by the web, which offers the possibility of building, developing, and strengthening virtual social networks and communities for social interaction and the creation of meaning. Electronic space, the '*third environment or milieu*', is a privileged space for human action, for the expression of feelings, meanings, actions, and passions. First and foremost, it makes remote or off-site, yet on line human actions possible (Echeverría, 2004). It facilitates the creation of new interaction spaces, of new social groups for the promotion of citizenship which in fact, whether independently or in cooperation, from different social fields and levels of experience, articulate and revitalize processes for the production, circulation, and appropriation of new symbolic products, meanings and senses. These are processes which contribute not only to generate new sources of knowledge but, above all, to strengthen processes of citizen interaction where, among many other social areas, the media, politics, religiosities, and socio-cultural processes intertwine strategically. According to Castells (2001, p.15), "Internet is the fabric of our lives"; due to its capacity to organize all walks of life or better, perhaps, all environments of human activity. For Raquel Recuero, a specialist in these matters, "Internet merely opened one more space for conversation, but it did make social connections more complex. The social network sites offer a space where social connections can be 'shown' thus creating new values and new forms of reputation"(Recuero, 2009, p.18-19).

In the midst of this cybercultural scenario, the purpose of this paper is to show how the religious area, as is the case of all the other social milieus —the political arena, for example— is part of the strategic transformations of the contemporary socio-cultural experience which came into being in the digital space. I would like to highlight some experiences of religiosity which find, in the potential offered by the Internet, new possibilities for interaction and religious recognition and acknowledgement, as well as new forms and spaces for interreligious dialogue to share a plurality of denominational options and socio-religious practices that give meaning to cybernauts; in other words, new ways —digital ones— of experiencing religiosity.

This paper is an attempt to approach, briefly, the above mentioned phenomenon in three consecutive parts: first, a critical contextualization of the worldwide digital social network phenomenon; second, an approach to some experiences with digital networks of religious recognition and acknowledgement in Latina America, and third, some questions which arise from these associative virtual practices.

1. En-tangled in the cyberspace

Asserting that human beings have been characterized from their remote beginnings by laying interconnecting social ropes and building bridges is not new: it is embedded in human nature. Yet, in the early 21st century, this natural need has been deeply altered, strengthened, and boosted via some techno-electronic mediations that, if understood from a practical point of view as a condition that enables individ-

uals' sociability, relationships, and social bonds, have lead to one of today's main concerns, i.e. 'to be connected to the web' (De la Peña, 2009). Thus, today, the most ancient and primitive of all human relationships have somehow been transferred to the Internet. Despite the fact that network construction is a rather old human activity —think about transportation, electricity, sanitation, education networks, etc.— the overwhelming power of today's technological innovations driven by the Internet has transformed all networks (in one way or another) into information networks, and has placed them in the epicenter of contemporary social structure. Today's factual truth is that we find ourselves en-tangled in cyberspace, in the middle of multiple possibilities to make social contacts, links, hyperlinks, and interactions.

But, how are we supposed to know what sort of dynamics can influence social networks in the cyberspace? How are the connections between the various actors in the web established? In this regard, we believe that a contextualization of the social networks in the web demands a critical rather than a chronological approach — however recent technological evolution is— to the notion of "web", in order to better understand its different implications. In this respect, several researchers (Castells, Lévy, Musso, Rheingold, Fuchs, Scolari, Echeverría, Sibilia, and Recuero, among others) have theorized on this concept; for obvious reasons, we cannot mention them all here.

This has been one of Manuel Castells' (1999, 2001, 2009) favorite subject matters and the topic of his latest books. For this well-known author, "a web is a set of interconnected nodes" (Castells, 200, p.15), meaning that, in spite of the fact that they are ancient forms of human association and activity, still today they have gained new lease of life because the Internet has turned them into powerful information nets that allow communication amongst many individuals at a global scale and a tone's own selected time. "Internet became a transition lever that will lead us to a new form of society: *the web society* […]; we have entered into a new world of communication: the Internet Galaxy. Internet is basically a global communication web, a product of human action in permanent evolution" (Castells, 2001, p. 16, 21). Thus, it is this new paradigm of information and communication technologies that allows us to speak of the '*web society*', even if Castells gives more emphasis to the logic of links rather than to the logic of social interests manifest in the webs, but does not stress sufficiently the meanings and senses of inter-subjectivity, the struggles for the acknowledgement of individual differences, and the power of communication itself (dialogue and communication purposes) which runs through and constitutes the web, an idea perhaps better expressed by the formula *Communication: the Net* (Hoyos, 2009).

On the other hand, it is important to highlight the view taken by Pierre Musso (2001) in his "*Génesis y crítica de la noción de red,*" (Parrochia, 2001, p. 194-217) in an attempt to show the evolution of the concept. Musso's starting point is an explanation of what the web means today, and then he develops the history of the concept. To begin with, he suggests that "the notion of 'web' is omnipresent, even omnipotent. It has replaced previous notions, such as those of 'system' or 'structure'.

Secondly, "the web's history is always linked to a double reference: the organism and the technology, both operating simultaneously. This explains why the concept is worked out with and against the images of the body and technology" (Parrochia, 2001, p. 194-195). Musso builds the history of the concept in three stages:

a) *The bio-metaphysics of the web*, which considers the web as the technique or technology behind the fabric: the idea of a web was present in Greek mythology, through the imagery of weaving and the labyrinth. Hippocrates' medicine associates it directly with the metaphor of the human body; more specifically, with the physician's metaphor of the 'brain-web' (*rete mirabili*) which prevails for centuries until the moment when Descartes takes it on again in his *Treatise of Man;* it was then approached by Saint Simon, Spencer, and the emergence of cybernetics, until contemporary authors. By associating the web with the human body, they work analogically to characterize the activities of human knowledge.

b) *The bio-politics of the web,* whereby the web is considered a self-regulated technique or technology. Throughout the 18thand 19thcenturies, the concept gets rid of the organic notion and acquires instrumental connotations. Four significant moments are highlighted: first, the ambivalence of the web as revealed by Diderot: it can be control or circulation; second, the centrality of the *panopticon* criticized by Foucault and the permanent circulation analyzed by Deleuze; third, the possibility of 'mathematizing' the web as discussed in René-Just Hauy's (1743-1822) theories on crystallography as the formalization of a reticular order (Musso, 2001, pp. 202-203) and as a prelude of the 'web' concept and its objectification as a technical matrix for railroad and telegraphic networks; fourth, the implementation of the concept of web or network into the social milieu, starting with Claude-Henri de Saint Simon's (1760-1825) approach. A transition is thus made towards the modern concept of web or network whereby everything is fused together in a generalized human communion under a sort of church that gathers an "association of brothers" thanks to communication (Musso, 2001, p. 204). The total 'metaphorization' of the web can be observed here, aiming at a social utopia or ideology, as Enfantin seems to declare when he asserts: "We have roped together the whole globe with our railroad, gold, silver, and electricity nets! Thus now expand, spread through those new paths of which you are in part creators and lords, the spirit of God, the education of mankind" (Musso, 2001, p. 207-208).

c) *The bio-ecology of the web,* which considers the net as self-organized technique or technology. With the advent of computers, we start talking about 'intelligent networks', 'intelligent societies' supported by an instrumental sense implicit in the concept of 'social engineering', hinted by the brain-computer relationship suggested by George Canghuilhem (Musso, 2001, p. 209). In 1996, engineer Michel Feneyrol predicts for the 21st century the triumph of webs conceived as organisms: "the nets or webs are living beings having several organs that perform particular functions (transmission, switching, and access) that put to work technologies which have undergone and will undertake further mutations" (Musso, 2001, p. 210). At this point, the previous optimism expressed by Castells merges in order to establish "the

world brotherhood of virtual communities. Freedom, equality, and fraternity: a social utopia finally reached thanks to the reticular technical utopia" (Musso, 2001, p. 211).

Finally, Musso (2001) shows how the notion of web breaks into pieces due to its vulgarization and commercialization: "the concept, devalued in thought, has been overrated by metaphors. Images have become invasive" (p. 212). Musso interprets the web as a "*real grid*". which manifests itself in two ways: on the one hand, as a *mode of reasoning;* that is, as "a structure of unstable interconnections having interacting elements, whose variability must follow some sort of operating rule" (p. 214).; but it is also a '*technology of the spirit*', an ideological wild card of sorts that comprises mixed levels of meanings (pp. 214-215). On the other hand, the web is manifested as a *'mode of space-time administration',* as a technical matrix: "the communication web adds to the physical space and time a broader space and a shorter time" (p. 215), but it is also a '*sack full of metaphors*' in as far as "the web allows opposition between a general form and a pyramid or a tree, whether linear or hierarchical, but prevents chaos and disorder" (p. 216).

Musso (2001) ends up by adding, paradoxically, his own metaphor to characterize the web "as the contemporary cathedral of the technological future […]", which does not point towards "the other world but towards the promised earthly future, developing endlessly into webs of webs and meta-webs." He concludes, very critically, by asserting that "the web became the final purpose and the means to think and carry out social transformations, and even the revolutions of our time. The web's 'imaginary' is nothing more than mere ideology, that is to say, a way of avoiding social transformation utopias. While Saint-Simon forged the concept in order to think about social change, the concept became a means to stop thinking about it. That's what happens when concepts are turned into fetishes. The web passed from being a rule or precept to become a concept before it had the time to impose it-self as precept." (Musso, 2001, p. 217).

From a different approach, Christian Fuchs (2008) puts forward the relationship between *Internet* and *society* as anew, self-imposed topic deserving urgent research. The *Internet-society* relationship can only be understood as a process of dialectical development, i.e., as a dynamic process of unity in the midst of diversity, thus avoiding any polarized perspective, be it technological determinism or social constructivism (Fuchs, 2008, p.3-4). The main idea is to identify the risks and opportunities that social problems face in the context of Internet and society, and to take them on as systems of opposing forces that may enhance either cooperation and democratic participation, or competition and alienation, two traits of capitalist individualism. Fuchs sees the Internet as a *global techno-social dynamic system* (Fuchs, 2008, p.121-139). Its main characteristic is the fact that it is a *self-organized web-system*, based on a decentralized technological structure whereby human actors continuously recreate global knowledge, produce and consume new information and new social meanings in computer interconnected nets. In it, objective knowledge

emerges from the cooperation amongst human actors (Pierre Lévy's '*collective intelligence*') within the dynamics of a technological structure.

More to the point, the *World Wide Web* (WWW), that is, the Web in its first developmental phase, *Web 1.0*, was governed by the emergence of textual links and hyperlinks, the creation of web sites, web pages, and browsers with a specific language (HTML) to process information. "*Web 1.0*was basically a system of cognition", a tool to think. But that was not all; the web continued its evolution until the new millennium arrived, and by2000 new platforms such as MySpace, YouTube, Facebook, Wikipedia, Friendster, etc., appeared to give birth to *Web 2.0*, a privileged media for human communication whose main characteristics were social interaction and communication; soon after, by 2005,a space opened for *Web 3.0*, where cooperation and the convergence of diverse systems and media prevail; techno-digital nets now support human cooperation (Fuchs, 2008: 123-125). The author suggests that all software is social in nature since it is a product of social actors, processes, and facts. From this perspective, the social network platforms (Web 2.0) focus on *on line* communication and have the power to gather virtual communities around social cooperation and understanding.

According to Fuchs, cyberculture is a self-organized dialectical system that involves a fight between two opposite forces: that of a socializing, cooperative cyberculture and that of a competitive cyberculture of alienation, fragmentation, and isolation; both forces reflect their own values. In the cyberculture system, identities, ways of life, communities, social networks, meanings, and values are permanently defined, redefined, and produced *on line*. From this perspective, Fuchs sees '*virtual communities*' as subsystems of the cyberculture system. Depending on the degree of extant "communitarity", he identifies three levels of virtual communities: *Level 1*: a virtual community based on a common communication technological infrastructure mediated by computers, with common hardware and software standards where technological information prevails. *Level 2*: a communication community mediated by computers where communication prevails and where the social level of the community is established with clear interaction rules in order to share common topics and interests *online*. *Level 3*: a virtual community whereby cooperation, feelings of esteem and proximity, a sense of belonging, as well as identities and values can be shared and developed. Obviously, not all virtual communities are spaces of harmony and equality or reach this level; quite on the contrary, many virtual communities actually prevail as social spaces for antagonism and competition, where there are different interests, senses and meanings (Fuchs, 2008, p.300-334). Social networks in the web, although resembling a perfect horizontality, are still constituted by hierarchies and verticalities, symbolic games of power. The dynamism and complexity of the social networks in the web are decisive to discern their verticality from the acknowledgement and recognition of the connections established by participants within those systems (Fragoso, 2009, p.14).

Fuchs concludes that the Internet is a powerful tool that allows information flow through dynamic processes of cognition, communication, and cooperation (Fuchs,

2008, p.130). For him, the Internet is not simply a technological network of interconnected computers but rather, and above all, a techno-social dynamic system that may give rise to a new potential of communication and cooperation. "If cooperation is the essence of society, then a real human society is a cooperative society" (Fuchs, 2008, p. 349).

Finally, we also base our reflections on the interesting study carried out by Recuero (2009): "*Redes sociais na Internet*". According to the author, the arrival of communication mediated by computers through the web has deeply altered all forms of social organization, identity, conversation, and mobilization. It widened the possibilities of connection and allowed the creation of social networks as privileged spaces for expression and interaction among individuals. She states once more that mathematician Leonard Euler (1736) was the first one to use the metaphor of the net in a scientific context, when writing an article on the problem of the *Seven Bridges of Königsberg;* he formulated the *Theory of Graphs* (connections) that was later used in social sciences to consider the groups of individuals connected as a social network (Recuero, 2009, p.19).

For Recuero, the possibilities of expression and socialization via the tools offered by computer-mediated communication enabled many social actors to build, interact, and communicate in the web with other social actors. Thus, "a social network is defined as a set of two elements: the *actors* (individuals, institutions, or groups) that make up the web nodes, and their *connections* (interactions or social links)" (Recuero, 2009, p. 24-55). With this in mind, we can now examine and analyze (Döring, Lemos, Sibilia) how those social structures emerge, come into being and organize themselves, and how information flows and social exchanges of various meanings are generated.

As far as the *actors* are concerned, they are the first element of any social network in the web. They are the actual persons involved in the net who act by interacting and establishing social bonds. Actors cannot be identified immediately, since very often one has to work with representations or with identity constructs (profiles) of cyberspace (be it through weblog, photolog, twitter or a profile in Orkut). Actors represent themselves in those interaction arenas and 'speech sites' to express, in narrative terms, elements of their personality or individuality via the Internet in answer to what Sibilia (2003) calls the "*visibility imperative*" (Recuero, 2009, p. 27): it is necessary to "be seen" in order to exist in the cyberspace, to be part of that society connected in a network, and to take possession of one's own "I" as a*sociability imperative* mediated by the computer. The point is to highlight the individual nature of expression in the cyberspace. "The possibility of reaching great visibility impacts both public and private senses in many different ways" (Fragoso, 2009, p.14). Actors also represent themselves through links or profiles, as in Orkut that facilitate contact with other actors. Thus, a single subject has several constructs and exhibits multiple aspects of his/her identity (Sierra, 2009).

In terms of *connections,* these correspond to the social links that are made, in turn, through the social interactions between actors. Thus, it is really the connections which become the focus of study since it is precisely their variability what alters the structure of those groups. According to Recuero, there are three constitutive elements of connections: *interaction*, *relationships*, and *social bonds*. But, how are we to understand *social interaction* in cyberspace? Well, it takes place through different factors: first, actors do not reveal themselves immediately; second, the sway of communication possibilities offered by the tools used by actors (either synchronously or asynchronously); third, the type of relations among actors; fourth, actors' capacity to migrate to different platforms; and finally, actors establish or maintain complex relationships with different values which in turn create long-lasting social bonds.

In relation to *relationships,* they are considered the basic analytical unit in a social network. Relationships cover a huge number of interactions that can be altered by the drifting apart of the people involved, providing more freedom and facilitating anonymity. The intensification of social relationships mediated by computers creates *social bonds* (by social bond we understand the effective connection of the actors involved in the interactions). These bonds, in turn, can be described as: *relation, interaction, association, or appropriation bonds*. The latter refers to a sense of belonging and acknowledgement. Yet, in a strict sense, all bonds are relational or binding, because they include elements of interaction and social capital (Recuero, 2009, p. 35-44). The author concludes that social networks in the Internet are not static; the change in time; they are dynamic and ever changing due to factors such as cooperation, competition or conflict, and aggregation that emerge from the appropriation of tools and the interactions among social actors (Recuero, 2009, p. 79, 91).

There is no room in this paper to further discuss the network phenomenon. Hopefully, this brief contextualization has helped to better understand the construction of social networks in the web along with their possibilities, implications, and challenges. "Talking seems to be a good idea for, usually different people do not ignore the same things" (De la Peña, 2009, p. 7).

It is therefore necessary to '*think the networks*' and all their implications (Parrochia, 2001) from a collaborative perspective rather than from detrimental *competitiveness* in the social area. This implies considering all possible levels: the most basic one, *recognition*, with actions aimed at recognizing the existence of others, and fostering acceptance. Upon recognizing, there comes *cognition,* that is to say, knowing what others are or do, showing interest for others. At the third level there is *collaboration*, where by individuals are willing to help; reciprocity is promoted. At the next level, *cooperation*, activities and resources are shared with values of solidarity. And finally, at the level of *association*, those involved share goals and projects on the basis of mutual trust. This way of thinking should fit the dynamics of an essentially communicative and dialogical model (Hoyos, 2009, p. 28). Thinking the networks entails a critical reflection on their scope and limitations in accordance with cultural and socio-geographical contexts.

2. Digital networks of religious acknowledgement and recognition

In line with what has been said before, the religious field - as well as many other human areas - has undergone changes at the same pace of technological progress during the last decade. The overall '*media-saturated atmosphere*' has facilitated the use of the Internet as a technological device to establish a new logic of interrelationships to spread the religious message (Gomes, 2010).

The time of religion has arrived in the digital era. Temples are no longer the only place where faithful individuals gather and share their faith. Television, and above all the Internet, is the new virtual temple which gathers, summons, and associates multitudes in the cyberspace so that they can express their faith and religious concerns. We are witnesses of the globalization of the religious message and experience that takes place at the same time as all other events of life. Religious faith in the Internet has become '*virtual faith*'; from it, all sorts of religious discourses, practices, and experiences (ranging from the most orthodox to the most sophisticated esotericism) emanate.

Cybernauts are grouping around different *religious digital networks,* just as they do around political movements and citizen or cultural associations. For extreme fanatics, it is a matter of evangelizing the Web, either from a fundamentalist or a syncretic stance; for more moderate groups, it is rather a question of facing the challenge to evangelize in and through the net, and taking advantage of its valuable potential; for others, it is just a matter of finding someone —online— with whom to share mutual recognition, religious and personal experiences, and to bear witness of their faith.

The interactive possibilities offered by the *Web 2.0* allow the religious phenomenon to gain the proportions of a new horizon to be discovered and worked for by believers. Once the religious scene has expanded and become more visible through Internet, believers have new options and possibilities. The production and exchange of information and symbolic content related to the religious-spiritual world are already at hand in enormous varieties in the web (Sierra, 2001). Yet, several intriguing questions arise from these new experiences with the religious phenomenon: What kind of religiosity can be found in the web? What do people look for when they visit religious web sites or seek virtual spiritual experiences? What impact do these practices have on people's religious experience? How is religious symbolism shaped or made in the net? How can God, or religiosity, or spirituality be genuinely visualized through these new globalizing technologies? What implications does this new cultural practice have in communication? What about Michel de Certeau's key question, 'What role do new cultural technologies play in the creation of collective beliefs? The idea is to solve the enigma behind the question, how is belief built in our societies? What are the foundations of credibility among social groups? (Certeau, 1994). These questions, of course, go far beyond our possibilities and deserve additional research. Be it as it may, there are new ways of seeing, feeling, participating, perceiving, and visualizing the religious phenomenon through the Internet that offer

enormous possibilities; however, they also have several limitations and raise multiple questions to believers.

According to a study carried out by Beltrán Cely (2004), in Latin America and in Colombia, particularly over the last 30 years, a religious shift that some authors refer to as *"religious mutation"* (Bastian, 1997) has taken place; thousands have abandoned the Catholic Church to follow new worships and beliefs. Many new religious groups gather multitudes and have become real empires of faith, making incursions into various fields such as politics and mass media; lately, they have done so particularly via the Internet, and have turned religion into a market and a profitable industry moving significant amounts of money.

Innumerable factors have contributed to this religious '*revival*' and diversification in Latin America through the media and the Internet; particularly, Pentecostal and Charismatic movements can be considered the two main expressions in the Latin American religious scenario (Beltrán Cely, 2004). Among the most prominent factors usually mentioned concerning this phenomenon, we can find: religious globalization and international missionary enterprises; urbanization and modernization; generalized social uncertainty; the religious voids left by the Catholic Church; the search for identity and meaning; aggressive proselytism; increased participation of secular, laypersons; the concern about the meaning of the community. To these, we would like to add the possibilities offered by Web 2.0 to create and enroll innumerable religious-social global or local networks. In the case of the Catholic Church, Pope Benedict XVI addressed for the very first time the issue of the so-called "*Church 2.0*" by creating a private channel in YouTube plus other applications for iPhone and Facebook (see: http://www.pope2you.net).

No matter which faith we embrace, almost certainly we will find it in the Internet; if we want to create one, it would be just as easy: Christianity, Islamism, Taoism, Rastafarianism, Hinduism, Spiritualism, European pagan religions, native practices, North American Indian rituals… etc. Surfing in the Web is entering a marketplace where, along with other goods, you can find *spirituality*. Most of the times that spirituality is based on a strictly psychological or emotional approach, very much in fashion, and has become a sort of therapeutic option that only seeks to comfort human beings through different practices. Some of these are characterized by virtual secularism – online relativism – digital syncretism – and digital freedom.

Consequently religions, social groups and political platforms are in the web to offer their goods, very often without the least concern for the truth or the inherent "goodness" of their products but rather moved by their proselytism or mere economic benefit. As time goes by, the trend to participate in virtual religious communities grows stronger. Brazilian researcher Silveira Campos (2009) believes that the presence of religious groups - Christian as well as other religious movements of non-Christian origin nor even Hindu and Islamic denominations - have found in the Internet a suitable place not only to spread but also to reformulate new ways of believing. For Silveira, the frontiers of communities have widened and become porous

while facing a process of deep alteration in personal relationships and face-to-face interaction. The axis *temple – priest – follower* has been substantially dislocated in favor of the '*media preacher*' – *screen/website – tele/cyber follower*. Internet has become one of the most popular forms to connect those in the "ministry of music' or the "praise ministry" at the local level, with the help of big producers of religious music and songs, a whole religious cultural industry with its own artists, '*vedettes*', singing priests, TV hosts ('*show-priests*'), conducting a show under the guise of "new cultural intermediaries". Followers that look for advice *online*, rabbis that lecture in YouTube, verses of the Koran circulating in Facebook, are just a few examples of this trend. The United States teems with this type of experiences; *Campus Interactivo Tangle* (www.tangle.com) is a good example of a American social network where groups of followers, churches, and ministers share videos, music, and discussions around the Bible… with sections for users to publish their prayers, rankings for the Bible's favorite characters, and a top-five list for rock, gospel, rap, and hip-hop Christian musicians.

It is worth noting that most of these digital religious networks usually share a set of characteristics: all of them have set *rules of behavior* which can by no means be broken. For instance, insults or obscene comments are strictly banned. Rules are often strict and by no means permissive, and there are coaches and monitors enforcing them. In contrast with the total freedom of other sites such as *MySpace*, some of these religious networks seem rather restrictive; they can even scare away adolescents and youngsters that frequently visit these sites in search of entertainment and more flexible environments. Yet, it is precisely this control what apparently explains the growing popularity of these religious sites, at least in the United States. For many of their members, the allure of these communities is that they assume the existence of some sort of *anti-MySpace*, a social network not much accepted in these milieus since it is perceived as a marred space where most people talk of sex and where there are no limits or control whatsoever.

Brazilian professor and researcher Pedro Gilberto Gomes (2010) suggests that many religious institutions still perceive the Internet as a 'technological device" that can be used to their advantage in order to establish new relationships and to 'be updated" rather than just a means to disseminate their message. Activities that used to be performed in the temple are now offered in the Internet: Sunday readings, virtual candles and bells, animated images of saints, interactive music, etc. Yet, by using the Internet only as a means to gain more followers, many institutions are not reflecting on the type of spirituality being generated in this process. Gomes says that "the simple fact that an individual relates (with others) through the website is already creating a different kind of spirituality or a new way of seeing religion. And that should be a matter of concern" (Gomes, 2010).

To briefly illustrate our point, we bring to mind the experience we had with four *on line* religious networks whereby their members, or cyber followers, exchange their faith and religious meanings. We believe these examples illustrate what it is to

live and experience one's faith based on digital networks of religious acknowledgement and recognition in cyberculture.

GODKUT: http://godkut.com/ (God based Social Networking)

Also known as the *Christian Orkut*, the name of this network is a parody of the famous Google's Orkut; it is very popular in Brazil and other parts of the world and was designed specifically for religious people who love God. *Godkut*'s goal is to become the biggest religious social network in the world. "We aim to unite people from all over the world in a social network through religion", and to create a peaceful and loving world full of good relationships with others. It identifies itself with the *GodTube* style, that is, a web site of Christian videos similar to YouTube; this is how the website is presented: "*In Godkut, you can freely share your faith with others. Connect with us, connect with God! Registration is free and takes only one minute. Create your own account in Godkut today!"*

As most of the extant social networks do (MySpace, Orkut, Facebook, Bebo…), *Godkut* has all the elements of this type of websites: a box for pictures of members, sundry photographs, videos, music, blogs, events, calendars and programs, surveys, and even a spot for religious news, a space for dating, and another one for personal profiles where members can share their religiosity and testify to their faith; there are chats, forums, and messages. Thus, *Godkut* is a religious website aiming at establishing relationships with others, finding friends, and discussing religious topics on the basis of mutual respect and freedom. It encourages debates on health issues related to spirituality, evolution, and the purpose of life. *Godkut* claims to be an unbiased website, free of rejection towards any particular belief, community, or sect.

E-VANGÉLICOS:
http://www.forocristianoevangelico.com/forumdisplay.php?f=222

The name comes as a blessing to *e-vangélicos*, the new preachers who see the Internet, mobile phones, or iPod downloads as new ways to spread the Word of God in the electronic era, as stated by the Spanish EFE News Agency (23-05-2006). Even though they do not have a particular website, their main concern is to connect the web generation, and to promote Church, faith and theological studies at the risk of turning them into another consumer's good.

By using clever and creative strategies, their aim is to take the Word of God to all contemporary electronic formats to capture the maximum number of parishioners. Under the motto "*Have you talked today with God*?", the company *Faith Mobile. Net* renders a service through which, for US$5,99 a month, clients are entitled to receive biblical messages, screensavers, photographs and images in their cell phones. "Cable- free digital technology allows us to be in contact with God. This is our opportunity to enjoy the Word of God with a single tap on the phone," says the company. In MP3 format, the menu is reach and contains a growing number of sermons available in the Internet so that anyone can listen to them by using an iPod (http://www.faithmobile.net/). In addition, there are prayer groups in the Internet at

http://www.worldprayerteam.com/, where personal prayers go across frontiers asking for help to cure a patient with cancer, or to put an end to violence among neighbors, or other petitions for divine intervention.

CANÇÃO NOVA: http://social.cancaonova.com/

http://blog.cancaonova.com/maosqueevangelizam/2010/05/17/rede-social-cancao-nova/

This is a Brazilian religious Catholic digital network with the following motto: "*Mãos que Evangelizam. Em nossas mãos os sinais de Deus para os surdos*". Founded in 2004, it is the social development network of the Charismatic movement called *Canção Nova*, very popular and well received in Brazil; it has a strong presence not only thanks to its own TV channel but also to radio stations, magazines, compact discs, summer camps, and other religious paraphernalia. Their goal is to "*raise new men and women for new times*".

The network concept took them to the commitment of continuous growth; their goal is to grow not only physically, or in terms of infrastructure and equipment, projects, and services, but also in quality and importance. They believe that through every social project (related to health, social service, and child, youth, and adult education) - a project being work that changes lives -, it is possible to raise, one by one, new men and women for a new world.

In this network, all participants are unities capable of achieving together great goals. Each project is linked to associates, volunteers, users, and to other projects. Individual network members can improve their own lives and the life of their family and their community; all members are links whereby the whole network is joined together.

This website has sections where new members can register, join a project, share news, upload photos or videos, offer volunteer work, as well as the community members' owns pace and contact information. Other digital platforms have been developed with great success in the web; an example of this is *Gente de Fé*: http://gentedefe.com/, a site whose purpose is to foster relationships and serious discussions and debates; it is there suggested that relationships among friends should be real and honest, the quality of friendship being valued over the number of friends. It incorporates in one single platform other sites such as Twitter, YouTube and Flicker where Podcasts are kept.

CRISTOVISIÓN:

http://trovador.ning.com/video/luna-eikar-luz-y-sal; www.cristovision.org

This is a meeting point, a social network for Catholic musicians aimed at spreading evangelizing work; it is closely connected to www.trovador.comor *Portal Trovador de Música Católica* (Catholic Music Minstrel Portal). It has entries to register as a new member, to upload photographs, videos and songs, to hold forums,

events, groups, and blogs. Its main purpose is to provide net surfers with a space to interact and to exchange religious music as a starting point.

We can also find *Cristovisión,* a TV channel of the Colombian Catholic Church *"To see the world through Jesus' eyes" (www.cristovision.org)*. Several dioceses, communities, and foundations have gathered under this project to create a media outlet whose target is Colombian and worldwide Spanish speaking Catholics. Magazine programs, talk shows, children, youth, and news programs, among other formats, are part of the channel's programming whose content is addressed to the Catholic public in general. The channel can be found in Facebook and from there it weaves social networks with colleagues, associates, and friends. Among the services offered by the channel, the following can be mentioned: *Let us pray for…*; *Friends' Club*; *Facebook*; *Downloads for your cell phone*; *The Bible*; *Cristovisión channel in the Internet*, *live signal*. Some programs can be followed via Twitter.

3. Real challenges for virtual religiosity

Religiosity, as experienced through the web, is a novelty that generates sympathy and many online visits, whether out of conviction or curiosity. Nevertheless, it also makes an undeniable contribution to the modification of traditional parameters of living, expressing, and exchanging faith. The reality we are now facing is that the new electronic technologies are actually changing the ways and forms of sharing beliefs and faiths. The ICT's suggest the construction of new and different relationships among believers and religious institutions.

It is true that faith in the web does contribute to the adequate use of these platforms supported by human reasons enriched by the spiritual motivations offered with that purpose. However, the fact that it also contributes to generate a different way of experiencing faith does bring forward some crucial questions and challenges. Opportunities to communicate one's faith, to get to know other people on the basis of their denominational identity portrayed in their profiles, to share initiatives and to develop projects that involve the spiritual dimension of men and women, whether individually or in groups are certainly positive since social networks enhance the growth of relationships based on contents (photos, information, videos, etc.). But in spite of all this, it is very important to consider not only the undeniable capacity to foster contact among people but also to ask ourselves about the quality of the contents that circulate in the web.

Therefore, we find it advisable to hold a critical reflection on the advantages and disadvantages, from both the institutions' and the believers' perspective, in order to analyze this problem in an attempt to answer the questions we have already made, i.e.: What kind of religiosity can be found in the web? What do people look for when they visit religious web sites or seek virtual spiritual experiences? Does virtual religiosity mean isolating individuals from the real communities where they testify to their faith *in situ*? What impact do these practices have on people's religious

experience? How is religious symbolism shaped or made in the net? How can God, or religiosity, or spirituality be genuinely visualized through these new globalizing technologies? What implications does this new cultural practice have in communication? Is going to church what really identifies Catholics?

The real issue here is to ask ourselves whether or not this increasingly trend to participate in virtual religious communities, through individual actions with very little or no community solidarity (and at times even conspicuous wandering and dispersion) is contributing to disintegrate in situ community celebrations. More specifically, in the case of Catholicism, we do believe that this type of digital religious networks can in fact revitalize forms of un-territorial and a-temporal cooperation, as well as foster contact and mutual acknowledgement and recognition among Catholics in order to spread and share the Christian message and, at the same time, to incorporate it into the cyberculture. Nevertheless, practicing Catholics know that there is no such a thing as virtual sacraments that encounters with Christ in the real world take place in the interaction with other members of the community. And so, how are we to experience ecclesiastical sacramentality in the web? There is yet another question: Will these virtual religious communities be sustainable in time? What will be the future of the so-called "*Religion 2.0*"? It will very much depend on how traditional structures interpret whatever is pulsing in the cyberspace.

What really is at stake vis-à-vis the digital religious networks is whether, thanks to them, human beings actually become better individuals who are spiritually mature, more conscious of the meaning of human dignity, more responsible and open to others, particularly to those in need, and more willing to help others.

The debate is open: in this '*internetic world*' of blogs, chats, Twitter, Facebook, blackberries and other sorts of digital social networks, these new open ways of linking, connecting, expressing, and giving meaning to religiosity and spirituality are overtly questioning the traditional forms of religious experience. What are we to do in view of this phenomenon?

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