"Cyberising God": A Theo-Phenomenological Investigation of Religion Online and Online Religion

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Abstract

A strong demand to rejuvenate the package of religion becomes inevitable consequence of current globalization era which is marked by the emerging of the giant network of networks, the Internet. By its high user and penetration number, the Internet creates some significant appropriations in the current society's social and religious lives. Religion Online and Online Religion are of many products of religion's appropriation effort to the coming of Internet. Using theo-phenomenological approach to analyze an example of Religion Online and Online Religion, this paper concludes that Internet not only is a powerful technology that could change the face of religion but it also functions as a religion itself, that helps people feel God's presence.

Keywords:

globalization, Internet, Religion Online and Online Religion
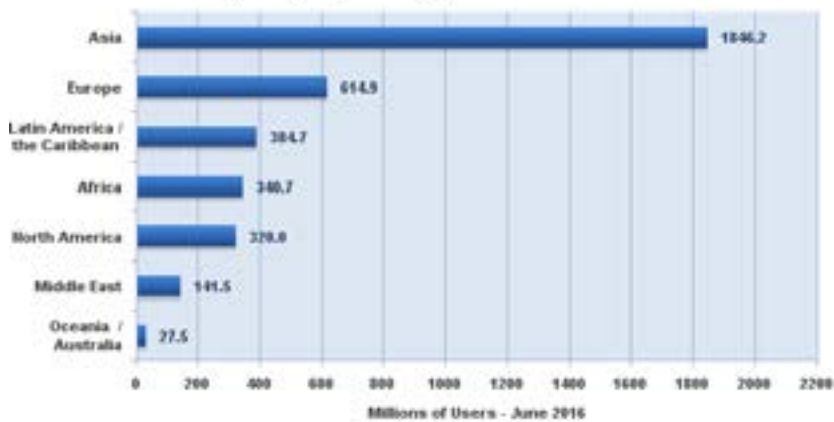
Introduction

Globalization, with all of its products, makes significant impacts on modern human's history. The most obvious one is the changing of peoples' patterns of life, horizontally (individual with him/herself and with the others) and vertically (individual with his/her God). Any changes happened to how the "global people" live their life, essentially is a form of negotiation to preserve their existence in such an always-changing life. In this context, religion inevitably has to take a part in the struggle for its

existence. Thus, religious practitioners are strongly expected to create a new, more sophisticated, formula to rejuvenate the package of religion—not only its mission methods but also including the way it is understood—to remains "fresh" and not left behind by its followers.

Recently, 'Online Religion' comes up as one of many products of current religious media reformulation. The term "online religion" refers to websites on the Internet which provide not only pieces of information related to one particular religious teachings or dogmas or activities, but also arranging online virtual rituals for everyone who is interested in experiencing new form of religiosity. Unlike this "online religion," "religion online"—another product of an effort to rejuvinate the package of religion—refers to the websites which provide only informations of a particular religion (Helland 2005, 1). However, according to Dawson and Cowan (2004), this dichotomy of "online religion" and "religion online" is not final yet, for there are many things needs further investigation to understand and define what exactly is the "online religion" and "religion online" (Campbell 2005). Even the word "religion" itself is too problematic.[1]
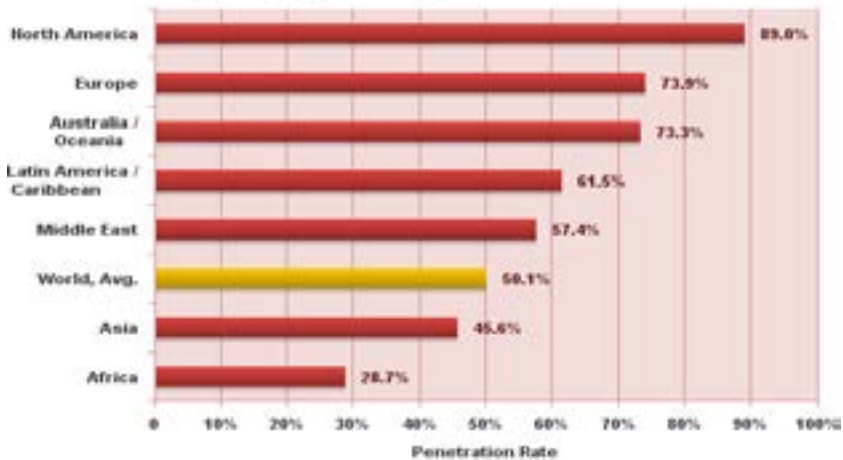
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1   This we can see from a vast long-lists of definition of religion proposed by the scholars (Federick Streng with his three primary dimensions, Charles Glock and Rodney Stark with their five distinct dimensions, Smart with his six-dimensional model, Marx with his notion of religion as opium, Durkheim with his social as religion, Eliade with her *hierophany* and many others) which no one of them is collectively understood. See: (Connolly 1999; Elliade 1959; Baum 2007; Pals 1996)

Internet Users in the World by Geographic Regions - June 2016

Region	Millions of Users
Asia	1846.2
Europe	614.9
Latin America / the Caribbean	384.7
Africa	340.7
North America	320.0
Middle East	141.5
Oceania / Australia	27.5

Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm
Basis: 3,675,824,813 Internet users estimated for June 30, 2016
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Internet World Penetration Rates by Geographic Regions - June 2016

Region	Penetration Rate
North America	89.0%
Europe	73.9%
Australia / Oceania	73.3%
Latin America / Caribbean	61.5%
Middle East	57.4%
World, Avg.	50.1%
Asia	45.6%
Africa	28.7%

Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm
Penetration Rates are based on a world population of 7,340,094,096
and 3,675,824,813 estimated Internet users on June 30, 2016.
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High Internet penetration rate and its users' large number—as shown in the above diagram—clearly indicates that this technology is greatly growing and significantly penetrating into our society's life. It does change not only the pattern of religious ritual but also creates its online ceremonial style. This great impact of Internet on the sustainability of religion in general creates an important question of how is it possible for this technology to "upload God" onto cyberspace or to cyberize God?

Researches on Internet and Religion have been done by scholars from different disciplines in last few decades. In 2001, Brasher published her book on Online Religion that shows her optimist view of how spirituality can still thrive in a cyberspace. Four years later, in 2005, Jumroni from the faculty of dakwah and communication at State Islamic University Jakarta investigated dakwah websites that used as contemporary dakwah medium to desaminate religious messages. One of his important conclusions is that there were only few dakwah websites existed in cyberspace. In 2006, a dissertation at University of Imam Ibnu Saud al-Islamiyah entitled:

وسائل الدعوة إلى الله في شبكة المعلومات الدولية (الانترنت)
وكيفية استخداماتها الدعوية

Written by Ibrahim bin Abdurrahim Abid had comprehensively discussed the Internet use for dakwah activity. What is more, in 2009, Bunt published his book called as "iMuslims" (which is a complementary to his previous books entitled *Virtually Islamic* and *Islam in the Digital Age),* which concluded that a Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) has a transformative impact to Islam and Muslims, particularly, in providing them a wider access to understandings of religious teachings. With regard to the relationship between Internet and social activisms in Indonesia, Molaei (2015.) and Lim (2013) published their writings on the contribution of the Internet to the success of social movements in Indonesia.

Unlike the aforementioned previous researchers on Internet and religion in Indonesia, this paper will investigate the phenomenon of "Religion Online" and "Online Religion" using theo-phenomenological approach (a combination of theological and phenomenological approach). This paper argues that the Internet—with advanced digital high-tech support—is successfully present God in a cyberspace, because both Internet and religion are essentially no different, and are function as medium to feel God's presence. To support the argument, this paper would like to discuss first of all about what is the Internet that we are talking about here, then followed with the embrio of what so called Religion Online and last we will discuss the discourse on religion's *hijra* to cyberspace by taking particular cases of religion online and online religion.

Internet: A Powerful World Insides A World

What exactly is the Internet that we are talking about here? Technically, Internet means a network connects many units of computer that communicate each other through the same link of telecommunications via broadcast tower satellite and cable (Hopkins 2003, 3). From the perspective of communication studies, this technology is one of mass media communication with a great capability to disseminate some communicator's messages to his/her communicants with no time and space boundaries.

Furthermore, Internet has its own unique characteristics compared to other classical communication media:

1. Internet is a computer-based media
2. As a media, it offers interactive and dynamic features for its users.
3. It might be an unlimited source of information
4. It covers areas beyond continents, nations, and even more, beyond cultures and religion

It offers support for developing business and any kind of field services (Sosiawan 2013).

Grossman et al.—as cited by Hopkins (Hopkins 2003, 7-8)—wrote the structure of Internet and its economic side. According to the writing, there are some unique characteristics of the Internet as below:

1. The structure of Internet is decentralized (no central authority); it is a network of networks designed with no gatekeeper,

2. Internet is global; providing live access to informations from all over the world,

3. Internet is abundant; it could accommodate a vast and even unlimited number of virtual communicators

4. Internet is very cheap; for it enable individuals to send message to a hundred even thousand using email or communicate through web pages with an affordable cost,

5. Internet is user-controlled; users have the authority to control it as they like

Having those characteristics of the Internet in our minds, it is reasonable to imagine the coming of a "global village"[2] or an "electronic town" as it is proposed by Joshue Eddings. What is more, its huge potency makes this new technology widely accepted by many people. For people, basically, choose the media based on the expected reward and the effort to get that reward. Let me give you an example from the media television. To get update information, some people prefer to choose television because it is easy to operate. We can easily move from one channel to another with one press of remote's button. But more often, we found the information provided by the television does not meet our need and far from what

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2 The term "global village" firstly introduced by Marshall McLuhan for his optimistic view toward the current technology development. This optimistic view is contradictory with William Gibson, Mark Slouka and others, who see the current technology development sceptically. To see clearly about this contradictory, see: Baran 2004, 298-299; Slouka 1995; Hadi 2005, etc.

we expect. At this point, Internet serves much better. We can get any information that we need only by a single click. Moreover, it provides us with so many options of information in the web pages and we can actively jump from one web page to another to gratify our need with a total authority to control which information is needed to read and which is not. This promising feature of the Internet makes its penetration and users' rate are getting higher and higher.

For many people today, they are not only using the Internet but even more they are 'breathing' with the Internet. Research on "internet deprivation" conducted by Yahoo! and an advertising company OMD reveals how hard it is to live without Internet. In this research, participants are asked to not using Internet in two weeks and write this experience on a journal. The finding shows that after this deprivation, many people feel bored and frustrated. A similar study was also conducted by Ipsos-Insight, which found that 64% of the participants chose a computer connected to the Internet to bring to a remote island (Buchwalter 2005).

In the context of Indonesia, it is interesting to find the fact that the Internet in Indonesia which was established in 1990s, the same period with the neighboring countries, is historically unique (Rahman 2016). Unlike its story in the neighboring countries (like Malaysia, Singapore, and Filipina and Thailand), Internet in Indonesia was not initiated by the government but it was by a little community known as Paguyuban Network (Paguyuban Net) who initiated its establishment. The Pioneer of Internet in Indonesia, Onno W. Purbo clearly mentioned that "Internet in Indonesia was built on the spirit of togetherness, of the people, for the people, by the people" (Kompas Tekno 2012). Sen and Hill, through an extensive historical investigation on the power of media in Indonesian cultural and political lives, concluded that 'if radio was the communication medium of Indonesian independence, then the Internet might well view for top billing in the fall of Soeharto" (Sen and Hill 2000, 194). This, in my

opinion, implies not only that Indonesian people are actually capable of creating and developing such technology; despite of how the government sees this technology, but also shows how Indonesian people are eager to be connected to each other and to the world for the better of the people. From this, we found a lot of works has been done to integrate the Internet in various aspects of the Indonesian people's lives. At the same time, it also proves that Internet has huge potentials to empower Indonesian people.

From this sub-section we can clearly see the great potency of the Internet, or "The Power of the Internet" (using Hopkin's term). The following sub-section will be a discussion about how this Internet's great potency is used by the religious practitioners for religious purposes to show that Internet could function not merely as a technological device to help people do their daily "worldly" activities but also it could function as a medium to gratify people's religious needs.

The Embryo of Religion Online

As Lorne L. Dawson ever mentioned in his article, there are five promises of the Internet for religion (Dawson 2001, 3-9), mainly spreading the word, building new communities, boundary breaking, virtual rituals and fostering a new religious consciousness. These precious potencies of the Internet are not to be wasted by religious people. Thus we find, historically, that religious usage of the Internet has been done since the early eighties, when people from Internet enthusiast and religious community began to explore Internet's potencies as media to communicate religious issues. The first religious oriented online group is Usenet known as "net. religion" which dedicated for conducting dialogues about religions, ethics and human attitude's moral implication (Ciolek 2003, 798-811).

This innovation kept progressing until the Usenet did some reconfigurations which then resulted in the emerge of many branches of net.religion like "alt.philosophy," alt.religion," "soc.culture," "soc.religion"

and "talk.religion." One of Internet religious usage products in 80's was the online church," established first in 1985 in 1985 located in http://www.ecunet.org.

In the 90s, many religious communities in cyberspace and religious mailing lists came up to the surface: in 1995 H-Judaic (www.h-net.org/-judaic/) appeared, in 1996 BuddhaNet (www.buddhanet.net) emerged and it still exists up to now. At the same year, TIME magazine published a special edition on online religion that comprehensively discussed many religious website and online religious resources, such as the first Monastic "Monastery of Christ in the Desert" (www.christdesert.org) and the first Islamic journal known as "Renaissance: A Monthly Islamic Journal (www.renaissance.com.pk).[3]

The period after the 90s and on, we are no longer able to find a valid data of how many religious websites emerges in cyberspace due to the phenomenon of utilizing Internet for religious purposes is mushrooming. For the Internet—according to Dawson and Cowan (2004)—has provided us a precious change to study, discuss, even more, introduced a brand new religious comprehension to any one in all over the world.

From the above explanation, we may conclude that Internet has transformed into a fertile land for the development of religion (Brasher 2001, 11). The following discussion will focus on investigating the reasons behind the transformation.

Religion and Internet; Religion's *Hijra* to Cyberspace

To begin the discussion, I would like to quote Ken Wilson's statement in his book "Jesus Brand Spirituality: He Wants His Religion Back" saying that "Prayer is about doing something that in some sense allows us to go somewhere" This Ken Wilson's statement was inspired by Phyllis Tickles'

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3   See: http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,985700-1,00.html

book (2003) entitled "The Shaping of Life." In that book, Tickles told the reader his memorable childhood experience when he saw his mother who routinely woke up at 03.00am and went to the family room to pray. For him, his mother was "going somewhere" at that time. In his lectures, Tickle explains what he means by "somewhere" as a "non-locative place." A place which has an entirely different dimension from what we have in our real life. In this context, Wilson said that the analogy of Tickles's "somewhere" is the same with the Internet. We assume the Internet is a space (cyber space), but of course it is not the same as an ordinary space that we have already known before. When we are "logging in," we are "going online" and after we finished "surfing," we already "offline" (Wilson 2008, 108).

Ken's previous statement about praying implies that the Internet and praying has the same function. As it is supported by Syeikh Hisyam Muhammad Kabbani, a Sufi order syeikh also found Haqqani homepage (http://haqqani.org/), that stated that Internet is an energy that isinseparable from spirituality, for energy and spirituality are like the two faces of a coin. They are inseparable (Zaleski 1999, 89).

The fact that Internet and religion are substantively not contradictive, together with the promising potency of the Internet for religion, accordingly the phenomenon of religion's *hijra* to cyberspace becomes irresistible. The next sections, I will provide an example of both Religion Online and Online Religion to give us a comprehensive picture of this phenomenon of religion's *hijra* to cyberspace. The next discussion then will focus on also fatwa webpage (www.alsofwa.or.id) as the example of Religion Online and "The Church of Fools" represent the Online Religion.

Before going further to see the example of Religion Online, let me first recall what I understand by Religion Online. The term refers to the websites which provide only information on the particular religion with no feature to conduct any online religious rituals.

alsofwah.or.id; Islam Potraited in Cyberspace

Based on an individual research done by Jumronni on the existence of *dakwah* websites as a contemporary *dakwah* media, among nine other *dakwah* websites, alsofwa.or.id is the website with the most theme of dakwah and most menu options (Jumroni 2005). Hence, alsofwa.or.id might be the best example for Religion Online.

At the very beginning of your visiting to this website, you will realize that this website is dedicated for disseminating *dakwah* and providing news and issues related to Islam. As you will find in bottom left of the page, below the logo, the identity of the website as *"Situs Dakwah dan Informasi Islam"* (Sites for Dakwah andInformation related to Islam).

This website is organized by the Al-Sofwa Foundation, a foundation committed to spreading out knowledge and dakwah based on *ahlussuna wah wal jama* and *salaf salih* way of life. As Foundation for dakwah, Al-Shofwa carries out an Open Islamic Studies via post and Internet to disseminate Islamic sciences and to reach urban and rural societies.

If we explore more the menus provided in this website, we may clearly see a potrait of Islam in cyberspace. There are at least 27 menus available in that website which contain of explanations on aqidah, *firqah* (sects), analytical articles, Iinformation related to Islam. The website, in general represents, what we call Religion Online.

Figure1
Al-Sofwah website's frontpage

The Church of Fools; Ritual in a Virtual Space

The most significant element differs Online Religion from Online Religion is the feature for conducting online religious ritual. The next section, we will explore more how religious ritual is being converted to a digital environment performed by digital people and full of digital spirituality.

In the 1970s, Simon Jenkins and his friends established a magazine called "Ship of Fools" which was then changed to "The Magazine of Christian Unrest." In April 1998, they launched the online version of their magazine still named as "Ship of Fools." From that time, they began to realize the high potency of the Internet compared to other print media.

In 2003, Simon and friends got a funding project for 3D Space Online which they called as "The Ark." There were twelve people involved in that project (six people in the UK, four people in the US, and the other two were from Canada). Those twelve people sat in front

of their computers in separated places, they logged in and played their characters by choosing their own personal avatars. They interacted each other using Gesture feature provided in that project. In this 40 days and nights project, each "Arkmate" did many activites assigned for them to do including discussing hot issues. All those activities were done online and controlled by the people from their own places through Internet.

The Ark itself is a wide "place" with many facilities: it has two levels, seven rooms and two crypts to keep animals. Online activities in "The Ark" were openly accessible for anyone on the Internet. There were more than 4000 people logged in either to see the Arkmate activities or simply explored rooms of The Ark.

Figure 2
Chapel Room

From this The Ark project, Simon and friends noted two interesting findings: first, related to the emotional side of the players in which this online activity evidently makes their emotional ties even greater. Second, every Sunday morning, the team transformed the living room of The Ark into the Chapel and appointed three people of them to prepare for the liturgy, like giving sermon, reading bible, praying, and discussing. This

"online ritual" inspired them to establish an "online church." They then thought to build an online church separated from The Ark to see what will happen.

In May 2004, Simon and team began working on their online church which they called it "Church of Fools." By doing this project, they were obsessed to come up with three "crazy" things, they said. Firstly, we want to translate the church into the Cyberspace to know its visitors responses in order to prove that online church could exist as any church in the real life. Secondly, we want to provide a deep spiritual impression into the visitors, to help them connected with their God. Thirdly, we want to educate people who are "anti-church" by providing them such the church in cyberspace. Hopefully, that would raise their consciousness to love church.

After discussing the format of their online church, Simon and team decided to form their Church of Fools exactly the same as it is in a real life. Like any other churches, Church of Fools has the living room with wooden benches for the congregation. It also has a chancel full of the altar, cross, and reading lecture.

Figure 3
The view of Church of Fools

Figure 4
The view of chancel in the Church of Fools

Church of Fools also has the Crypt. A quite large room with many seats used for many 'informal' activities like relaxing, socializing, meeting with friends, discussing with people, and many others.

Figure 5
"The Crypt"

Everyone who logged in the Church of Fools chose their own avatar, male or female, with whatever setting they want the avatar to look like. These avatars could talk each other, walked around, sat on the benches, and kneeled on the ground. The team created a specific feature to "kick out" any intruder in the church.

Interaction in Church of Fools was done by using text-based environment. The team provides limited sound feature only for church bell and hymns. To communicate, everyone could type the words from the control panel. There was also feature for shouting so that people might directly come surrounding you to listen to you and other features for whispering. In this church, there were twelve gesture options which were very helpful to do social and religious ritual activities. Three of them were specifically designed for 'religious' gesture: bless, cross self, and hallelujah. To use these features, users only need to click on the available menu.

At the beginning, Church of Fools only conducted service once a week that was on Monday evening, with a complete set including praying, reading bible, singing hymns, and giving the sermon. However, based on so many requests from the visitors, the team then conducted a service every morning and praying together every night according to UK's local time. The process of service began by ringing the bell (adopted from a Catholic church) three times and the visitors who listened to the bell and were still in The Cypt were hurried to the main room to join the service devoutly. Many visitors felt.

During this online church project, Simon and team conducted a survey to know who were the visitors and their impressions about The Church of Fools. There were 2400 people who registered in this online church:

• 58% of them were male –environmental games enthusiasts

• 50% were below 30 years.

• 39% visitors were the congregations who rarely came to church (they

only came on Christmas, Easter and family occasion.

• 48% visitors were from US; 27% from UK 12% from many countries in Europe.

People who knew about this online church offered different opinions. Some said that online church would not be able to replace the existed real churches. Others said that Internet is too important to be rejected by the church, even more; the religious leaders should take a part in building the churches in cyberspace. "Many people entered the church thinking that the whole thing would be too trivial to consider seriously, but found themselves surprised and maybe even surprised by God." (Jenkins 2008).

Conclusion

The internet, indeed, creates a crisis of boundaries between our sense of self and our sense of changing roles: the 'hats we wear' in different situations are altered (Shields 1996, 1). Including the religion we sense. Even more, the Internet is changing the face of religion worldwide (Dawson and Cowan 2004). The fast and never ending technological developments, particularly in the area of information and communication technology, will make the changing even greater. The phenomenon of Online Religion and Religion Online convincingly shows that the Internet is not only a powerful technology that could change the face of religion but it also functions as a religion itself, helping people feel God's presence.

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