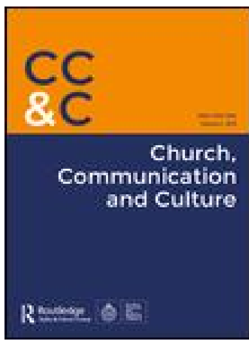

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Church, Communication and Culture

ISSN: 2375-3234 (Print) 2375-3242 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rchu20

Assessing changes in the study of religious communities in digital religion studies

Heidi A. Campbell & Alessandra Vitullo

To cite this article: Heidi A. Campbell & Alessandra Vitullo (2016) Assessing changes in the study of religious communities in digital religion studies, Church, Communication and Culture, 1:1, 73-89

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2016.1181301

© 2016 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 26 May 2016.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 22

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rchu20

Download by: [KU Leuven University Library] **Date:** 30 May 2016, At: 23:59

CHURCH, COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE, 2016
VOL. 1, NO. 1, 73–89
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2016.1181301

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

Assessing changes in the study of religious communities in digital religion studies

Heidi A. Campbell[a] and Alessandra Vitullo[b]

[a]Department of Communication, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX, USA; [b]Department of Philosophical & Social Sciences, Università degli Studi di Roma "Tor Vergata", Rome, Italy

ABSTRACT
This article provides a focused review of researches undertaken within Digital religion studies in the last three decades, specifically highlighting how religious communities have been studied and approached within this area. It highlights the dominant theoretical and methodological approaches employed by scholars during what is being described as the four stages of research on religious communities emerging over this period of time. Thus, this article presents the findings of key studies emerging during these stages to illuminate how the study of religious communities online has evolved over time. It also offers insights into how this evolution specifically relates to the study of Catholic community online. Finally, a theoretical analysis is given, assessing current research on religious communities within Digital Religion studies, and approaches for future research are proposed.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 6 February 2016
Revised 16 March 2016
Accepted 1 April 2016

KEYWORDS
Community online; digital religion; internet; offline; online; religious communities

Downloaded by [KU Leuven University Library] at 23:59 30 May 2016

About 30 years ago religious discussions and practices started to appear online. At the beginning of the 1980s, two students from Chicago University developed a Bulletin Board System (BBS) which was part of a larger virtual forum called *CommuniTree*. 'Create Your Own Religion' was the name of the BBS discussion area that could be considered the first religious-oriented activity online. Rheingold (1993) was one of the first scholars to document this primordial form of religious communities online, giving them the name 'virtual communities.' During the same period, religious discussion groups began to surface on Usenet; in 1986 Ecunet (www.ecunet.org) became the first ecumenical network online; and in 1992 the first virtual Christian Congregation was established by American Presbyterians with the name 'The First Church of Cyberspace' (www.godweb.org). Early studies focused on documenting the ways religious practices were imported onto the Internet through the creation of 'virtual communities' on discussion platforms and web-based houses of worship such as cyber-churches, and conducting religious rituals like prayer and even 'virtual marriages' online. At the heart of these early experiments were questions about the notion of religious community online, including what group interactions through an online forum or platform can

CONTACT Heidi A. Campbell heidic@tamu.edu Department of Communication, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX, USA

© 2016 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Downloaded by [KU Leuven University Library] at 23:59 30 May 2016

truly be considered a religious community. The Internet has progressively become a space where there is a growing presence of religions online, opening a new and flourishing interdisciplinary field of study (Hoover and Lundby 1997; Campbell 2005b) with interest focused on a number of key topics such as religious rituals, spaces, authority, community, and identity.

Over the past three decades, scholars have sought to carefully investigate religious groups and their activities on the Internet, to see what aspects of traditional religious practice can truly be translated online and to what extent religion is transformed as it is adapted to new digital technologies (Campbell 2005c). The study of religion and the Internet is described as 'Digital Religion' research, in which scholars consider how religious practice, discourse, and engagement have become embedded in online and offline contexts and the interconnections between those two contexts. This area of research's evolution has often been described in terms of four waves of scholarship (Hojsgaard and Warburg 2005; Campbell and Lovheim 2011), as a way to characterize the key questions and approaches taken by scholars investigating various aspects of the intersection between new media, religion, and digital culture. In this article, we refer to these waves of research concentration by using the term *stages*, in order to capture the progressive phases of study related to how scholars have conceived religious community online.

Initial research can be understood as the descriptive stage, focused on documenting how different groups were described, or described themselves, as religious communities online. In stage two, scholars focused on categorization, identifying the common characteristics of how community was performed and members functioned online. Then, in the third stage, scholars began to recognize that, not only were forms of religious community emerging online, but offline religious communities were discovering ways to use digital platforms and technologies to serve their members and enhance their ministry work. This meant paying closer attention to offline religious communities' negotiation with new media and theorizing over online and offline community practices. Current research, which can be considered stage four, tends to focus on the intersection of online and offline religious communities' practices and discourses.

This article provides a focused review of researches undertaken within Digital religion studies in the last three decades, specifically highlighting how religious communities have been studied and approached within this area. It highlights the dominant theoretical and methodological approaches employed by scholars during what is being described as the four stages of research on religious communities (Cheruvallil-Contractor and Shakkour 2015) emerging over this period of time. Thus, this article presents the findings of key studies emerging during these stages, in order to illuminate how the study of religious communities online has evolved over time. It also offers insights into how this evolution specifically relates to the study of Catholic community online. Finally, a theoretical analysis is given, assessing current research on religious communities within Digital Religion studies, and approaches for future research are proposed.

Religions go online: the emergence of 'virtual communities'

Since the 1980s several religious groups emerged online, embodying different virtual religious expressions: cyber-churches (Gelfgren and Hutchings 2014), online prayers

(Young 2004), online pilgrimages (Brasher 2004), 'godcasting' (Campbell 2010), and *godblogging*. This online religious effervescence prompts researchers to observe the presence of religious groups on the Internet from different points of view. Over the years, studies have focused on Internet's effects on communities: how religious communities negotiate and create communal meanings (Fernback 2002), how they transport and transform traditional religious practice online (Bunt 2003), how online communities help construct personal religious identity (Lövheim 2004), how communities renegotiate their values in the use of technologies (Campbell 2010).

Starting in the mid-1990s, first works published on the social impact of the Internet were highly speculative and split the field of study into two opposite perspectives on the Internet's impact on society and religious culture – one utopian, the other dystopian (Hojsgaard and Warburg 2005). Positive attitudes encouraged Internet usage to improve Church ministry abilities or foster new forms of spiritual connection and engagement (Zaleski 1997; Wilson 2000). In contrast, critics suspected the virtual spiritual experience was inauthentic (Brooke 1997; Jantz 1998). In this phase of study, the Internet was seen to possess the capacity to either build religious solidarity or potentially destroy traditional religiosity. The pioneering studies of religion in cyberspace were subject to this dichotomy. O'Leary and Brasher's 'The Unknown God of the Internet' (1996) described the Internet as a new place where religions could transmit their message and reproduce their religious environment. Two years later Cobb (1998) formulated a 'theology of cyberspace,' trying to demonstrate how the Internet fosters and informs the perception of the Divine. Wertheim (1999), on the other hand, argued the changing of the concept of space in the cyberspace allowed people to valorize the inner (spiritual) perception rather than the physical one.

Religious institutions also perceived the Internet as a new space for evangelizing. In the book *The Gospel in Cyberspace: Nurturing Faith in the Internet Age*, Fr. Babin and Sister Zukowski (2002) suggested the growth of the Internet's influence on society required the Church to change its catechetical paradigm to better communicate in the language of digital culture. This change aligned with Catholicism's early adoption of the Internet to facilitate Church communication and the fact that the Net was just as quickly adopted by its members. As Horsfall (2000) noted during this period, 'Web pages that promote an individual's take on Catholicism are not approved by the Church, but neither are they opposed' (157).

The Catholic Church has long been a pioneer in using new technologies for social and ecclesial communication. In the 1957 *Miranda Prorsus* Pius XII encouraged the use of new technology as a gift given by God to empower humanity; in his 1964 discourse at the Aloysianum Center for Automation Pius VI also exalted those sciences and technologies that serve the Spirit (Vitullo 2014). In this era Babin and Zukowski's (2002) work pointed to *Communio et Progressio* as a basis for informing how the Catholic Church should think about the emerging potential of the Internet and its theological implication for outreach and institutional adoption.

In this first phase of study, researchers focused their attention on a single community to identify technologies and new strategies used by 'virtual communities' to gather believers online and pinpoint the narratives and practices these groups constructed on the Internet. Scholars saw the virtual life of religious groups as separated from their offline religious practices, even though members saw their online religious activities as

Downloaded by [KU Leuven University Library] at 23:59 30 May 2016

a continuation of their offline religious involvement (Dawson and Cowan 2004). Although these works quickly became dated because of the rapid progress of technologies, they posed important questions about the nature of online communities.

Religious community online? – studying the rise of online community

In order to study and understand this new phenomenon, most early stage researchers focused on ethnographies of online groups describing themselves as communities. In the 1990s much of this research was case-study oriented, looking intensely into the lush, dense descriptions of single online communities and attempting to unpack their practices and implications. In the late 1990s research on online prayer and church-like forums demonstrated how religious Internet users explored new ways of building community and congregations in what was often popularly described as a 'disembodied' space (Campbell 2003). At this time, religious communities began to emerge in many different text-based environments – from early chat forums like Internet relay chat to faith-based discussion forums in newsgroups and on BBSs (Ciolek 2004). Also, because the Internet was primarily a text-based environment, much of the participant observations of online communities involved analyzing texts from discussion forums and websites. People were engaging in text-based forums and building community and forming relationships. Many scholars provided substantial studies to help lay the ground work for future research – for example, O'Leary's (1996) research on how members of new religious movements may benefit from networked interactions and Fernback's (2002) study on Wicca bulletin-board-based communities.

The access scholars had to religious environments was a unique aspect of this era. Researchers could observe and study many religious groups in ways that had never before been possible. For example, a researcher could never simply have walked into a closed or bounded religious group to record and investigate sacred and private rituals (Brasher 2004), but online a researcher could easily join and observe both of the religious and social components. In this atmosphere, early scholars encountered many tensions. One crucial area of tension centered on framing of the nature of 'reality' versus 'the virtual.'

Popular understanding often assumed that what was found offline was real, while the online was simply 'virtual', or a digitized representation of reality. In other words, researchers experienced challenges in conceptualizing and comparing online gathering spaces with the information and experiences supposedly offered in offline environments. Simply put, there was something not as real, or even false, in the online environments. Scholars understood these environments as a new kind of social space and interaction, but struggled to understand how to frame these digital contexts in relation to larger social processes. Early ethnographies also articulated tensions about the extent to which researchers could simultaneously serve in the role of critical observer and community participant in online environments (i.e., O'Leary 1996). How much participation is required to obtain an insider's view and be seen as a member of a group? To what extent may online participation influence or bias one's critical evaluation of a given community or context? Many tensions arose due to both the novelty of the research, and the fact that scholars were learning how to use the technology *as* they conducted their studies.

Downloaded by [KU Leuven University Library] at 23:59 30 May 2016

Online religion–religion online, changing perspectives

Helland (2000) took the first step toward changing researcher perspective. In his article 'Online-Religion/Religion-Online and Virtual Communitas' he introduced a new nuance of religious presence online. He presented a distinction between online religion and religion online that would be used under different names in many following studies, proposing a new theoretical approach for categorizing religious presences online. In the same year Helland's article was published, Hadden and Cowan (2000) edited the first collection on religion and the Internet, arguing that three important areas of study were emerging in this field: 'the "identification and measurement" of forms of religious practices online, a "systematic study of the key substantive concerns" emerging in relation to the study of religion online, and lastly the 'theoretical and empirical exploration' of how we assess the impact and influence of religion online' (26).

In 2001 an international conference on *Religion and Computer-mediated Communication* was held in Copenhagen, and in 2005 Hojsgaard and Warburg edited a book compiled of all contributions presented during the conference, contributions that tried to answer some of the most important issues raised by the religious phenomenon in cyberspace and virtual religious communities. What does the Internet do to religions? How are religious experiences mediated online? In what ways have religious individuals and groups adapted to the emerging reality of virtual culture? The emergence of all these issues suggests studies on online community were becoming more and more articulated. After all, during these years a very curious phenomenon of religious groups started to appear online.

In 2004, while Brasher described the overall emergence of online religion, seeking to validate her argument that cyberspace is a public domain fit for religious expression, the Methodist Church of Britain created the first 3D church, the Church of Fools, where congregants creating an avatar could pray and interact with other users in a 3D environment; in the 3D virtual world of Second Life the first Synagogue-Temple Beit Israel and the first Anglican Cathedral appeared; and participants in World of Warcraft, the 3D Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG), created mystical and magical avatars and places.

Researchers were trying to understand that it was not simply technology, but rather people who were generating these new forms of religious expression online. Studies on online community started to provide reflections on how members construct their interaction and patterns in the virtual. While some investigations of religious use of the Internet emphasized findings that highlighted the problematic influence Internet adoption posed for religious institutions (Armfield and Holbert 2003), most studies highlighted the positive potential and the connections between online and offline communities. By exploring practices, behaviors, and participation, researchers revealed that online communities were transforming the traditional meaning of community. Very helpful in this period was the return to the concept of 'networked community' (Castells 1996) that offered a valuable lens for describing the function of community both online and offline and opened the way for future theoretical developments, i.e. networked individualism (Wellman 2001). Summarizing Larsen's concurrent work (2001) on the online activities of 'Religious Surfers,' Arasa et al. (2010) showed that

Downloaded by [KU Leuven University Library] at 23:59 30 May 2016

the most active Religious Surfers are also the most active offline participants in their faiths (39-41). The increase in online communications caused religious authorities concern that believers would replace churches with chat rooms or e-community (Arasa 2011). Katz and Rice (2002) developed the Synoptia Project to clarify these very concerns: '[the Internet] does not supplant communication forms, but rather supplements them' (329). Some of the primary Internet benefits cited included helping staff and members stay more connected, enabling in-depth research for sermons, and enabling members to stay more connected to their local community.4 (2005) confirmed these trends by observing Christian email-based communities in which the majority of members described participation in the online community as a supplement, not a substitute, for offline church involvement. After this study, Campbell (2005a) also provided a description of several understandings of spiritual community online: online community as religious identity, as a spiritual network, as a support network and as a worship space.

At this stage, studies focused on Catholic use of the Internet and the institutional impact of integrating this technology into traditional, offline religious life and ministries. For example, Cantoni and Zyga (2007) sought to measure the Internet use of 5812 Catholic religious congregations and institutes around the world. Their study revealed two important findings: (1) the evidence of intensive Internet use by central Church institutions, especially for official communication; and by contrast, (2) the more cautious and less active use of ICTs by autonomous Catholic organizations. Although Internet use was increasing during this second stage of research, Cantoni's findings confirmed Catholic adoption of the Internet as a very centralized and structured form of online communication.

Studying trends and typologies in religious community online

Again during this period, Helland's 'religion online' versus 'online religion' framework (2000) was influential. This was one of the first theoretical devices used to distinguish how people participated online and the extent to which religion online was imported from offline religious practices or originated purely online. Helland sought to identify discernible characteristics between religion and religious activity created for the sole purpose of an online community and the importation of traditional offline structures and theologies to the online realm.

Scholars studying community focused on identifying the common characteristics and forms of religious community emerging online in order to understand the practices and motivations of these groups. At this time, debates over the nature and understandings of what constitutes community online began to emerge (Campbell 2005a). In order to study community online, researchers tried to create methodology categorizations, often emerging from grounded theory (Campbell 2005c). Using approaches from fields such as Sociology and Media Studies, scholars drew on methods of close observation and ethnographic work that in turn lead to critical reflection on observations from other secular studies of community online (Jones 1997). Scholars also began to recognize that observations from a single case study were often not sufficient to make large-scale claims about religious practice online, and comparative case studies became popular.

Downloaded by [KU Leuven University Library] at 23:59 30 May 2016

This analysis focused attention on questions of how religious communities enable users to express their religious identity and argues the reasons online religious engagement could be seen as an authentic form of religious community (Lövheim 2005). Scholars began to expand the aspects of ethnography beyond simple participant observation and textual analysis to incorporate online and/or face-to face interviews along with questionnaires. There was also a systematizing of online methods as researchers developed more standardized online survey methods and developed online interview protocols.

In this era, much research was conducted on cyber-churches. These ranged from simple text-based websites where a user could simply navigate through hyperlinks and digital text to full interaction in a virtual chapel or chat room that used typing and audio technology to provide a more real-time worship experience (Dawson and Cowan 2004). For example, the Church of Fools was one of the first virtual reality worship environments where people entered a digital cathedral environment as an avatar and engaged with others in a worship service of prayers, hymn singing, and listening to guest preachers (Jenkins 2008). Within these kinds of environments, scholars tried not just to describe the different features of these cyber-churches, but also to uncover the different levels of participant engagement offered and design intentions. Scholars were attempting to answer questions like, 'What motivates people to go online?' and, 'What are the different ranges of responses to how people engage and conceptualize the online environment?'

Downloaded by [KU Leuven University Library] at 23:59 30 May 2016

Considering online and offline religious community

At this third stage, the study of community and the Internet began to focus not only on expressions of religious community online, but also on how religious communities and organizations in offline contexts were using and being challenged by the rise of the digital (Cheong and Poon 2009; Campbell 2010). Religious organizations created religious versions of popular technologies – such as GodTube.com and Millatfacebook.com, representing Christian and Muslim versions of YouTube and Facebook. These tried to duplicate services provided by similar popular social media, but offered them in a religiously safe environment. Scholars started to examine the purpose behind this trend and how religious institutions created these digital religious platforms.

Noomen et al. (2011), interviewing 21 Catholic and Protestant web designers, discovered Catholic users of the Internet were motivated by the desire to make themselves and their religious voices heard within the chaos of the secularization process. Unlike their Protestant colleagues, Catholic web designers struggled with the dilemma of 'either following Roman orthodoxy or creating room for dialogue and diversity,' creating a tension between traditional hierarchical structures and new forms offered by the Internet to 'restore a common Catholic identity' (1112). Cantoni et al. (2012) continued their observation of Catholic priests' Internet use in the PICTURE project (Priests' ICT Use in their Religious Experience – www.pictureproject.info). Among the 4992 priests responding to their questionnaire, they found less than half (41.6%) considered the use of digital technologies important and able to improve their priestly mission, and a little over a third of priests (35.9%) used the Internet to pray at least once a

week. However, 52.5% of priests did consider the Internet a useful tool for spreading the Christian message. This showed that while some sectors of the clergy were adopting the Internet to reach out and build Catholic community, there was still a notable sense of hesitancy amongst many priests concerning the importance and usefulness of the technology. In an effort to help understand how the Church reflects on the theological implications of the digital revolution, Spadaro (2014) presented a 'cybertheology' that suggested we must alter the ways we perceive reality and God are being reshaped by this new context and how it offers alternative readings of core theological themes such as the sacraments and 'virtual presence.'

During this period, virtual world platforms such as Second Life were popular places to study new forms of religious engagement and community building, because scholars could observe how religious institutions and communities constructed religious spaces within these virtual environments. Careful study of virtual avatars also enabled researchers to study individuals' religious practices and intentions in the many virtual temples and churches created in these virtual worlds. Observing the virtual activities of avatars in the Church of Fools, Miczek (2008) noted the virtual adaptation of religious ritual required the transformation of traditional practices, the invention of new artifacts and forms of engagement, and the exclusion of some elements associated with embodied ritual. In his study of cyberpuja in a virtual Hindu temple and prayer practices in a virtual church, Jacobs (2007) also noted a variance in the extent to which participants felt online rituals could replicate offline rituals and be seen as truly authentic. He found that 'while Virtual Temple can be considered as being homologous to domestic shrines' (1118), the pastor who designed the Virtual Church considered it a supplement to the physical church and 'a false approximation of the real' (1118). These studies presented virtual worlds as unique spaces to potentially re-create forms of religious community, yet a sphere often possessing built-in limitations in the ways avatars/religious users could duplicate traditional communal worship experiences.

Comparative study of digital community practice

By the mid-to-late 2000s scholars began to identify methods and tools for analyzing data and assessing findings in light of larger theoretical frameworks. During this stage, scholars worked to explain and contextualize their research efforts to see how studies of religion online illuminated not just trends in digital culture, but pointed to larger shifts in religious culture in general. Scholars also saw a growth in religious groups and organizations online, indicating an increased recognition amongst religious institutions of the importance of having a presence online and using the web in more concrete ways to disseminate religious information and mission. The negotiation between offline entities and their online counterparts became an important issue to consider.

In order to accomplish this type of analysis, scholars began to implement more large-scale comparative work. Researchers were starting to see comparisons not just between individual case studies, but also across broader religious traditions. The theoretical perspectives became more complex as the methodology expanded to greater data sets. Researchers moved more towards detailed content analysis. Therefore, as the web became more visual and its use expanded, it became important to develop methods that included visual cultural studies and translate those into the online contexts.

Downloaded by [KU Leuven University Library] at 23:59 30 May 2016

Popular research themes at this stage included considering how the Internet challenges established religious authorities (Barker 2005), empowers new religious leaders (i.e., Campbell and Golan 2011), and provides new opportunities for traditional leaders to re-assert influence online (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai 2005). New theoretical and methodological frameworks were also taking shape. Some scholars sought to provide systematic interpretive tools for analyzing offline religious communities' negotiation patterns with new media (Campbell 2010) and nuanced understanding of authority negotiations online (Campbell 2007).

Current study of religious community online and offline

Within the most recent phase of study of religion and the Internet, scholars are deepening the consequence of the intersection between online and offline religiosity and identifying the implications the joining of user–believer and new media technology for some religious components, such as rituals (Helland 2007; Grieve 2010), community (Cheong and Poon 2009; Campbell 2010), identity (Cowan 2005; Lövheim 2006), and authority (Campbell 2007). Some scholars are trying to outline a theoretical-methodological approach to define how users shape media technologies to pursue religious/spirituals aims (Hjarvard 2008; Campbell 2010; Aupers and Houtman 2010; Hutchings 2012). Scholars observe how religious communities shape and renegotiate technological platforms according to their values, their patterns, and the construction of their moral economy (Silverstone and Haddon 1996). Rashi and McCombs (2015) are analyzing Internet use from an agenda-setting theory standpoint to consider how Chabad, an Ultra-Orthodox Jewish movement, incorporated the Internet into its community practices and outreach, despite the fact that the majority of Ultra-Orthodox communities have forbidden the use of Internet because of its secular contents. Chabad locates its justification for using the Internet by drawing on the words of the Talmud (i.e. 'all objects of this world were created to be exploited for holy use'), demonstrating the way religious communities often closely link their media motivations and use patterns to core beliefs and the religious teaching of their community.

Deepening the analysis of online and offline context studies revealed the fact that Internet users consider these two 'realities' part of their whole social life, but as highlighted in the recent work edited by Cheong et al. (2011), there is no settled notion of how offline religious groups interact online. Johns's (2015) survey of religious Facebook users found the social media platform provided users with a unique online venue for supporting their offline religious organizations and communities.

Occasionally, various investigations stand in tension between an ephemeral understanding of online communities (Hutching 2012) and evidence that emphasizes their reinforcing role in religious offline practice (Cheong, 2010). Recent surveys from Pew Research Center (2011 and 2014) show there is much more to be learned about the complex connection between religious activism and the use of the Internet and on the phenomenon of virtual community. Indeed, the Pew Research study (2011) notes that Americans who are members of religious groups are also engaged with core technology at the same the level, or higher, than the overall population: 79% of Americans active in religious groups are Internet users, compared with 75% not involved; 75% of religiously active Americans are email users, compared with 68% of those who are not in

Downloaded by [KU Leuven University Library] at 23:59 30 May 2016

a religious community. Moreover, as is the case for any other civic and social group, all Americans active in religious communities or organizations think the Internet positively affects the community's assets and activities: 68% of religious Americans said the Internet has had a major impact on the ability of groups to communicate with members; 57% of American participants in religious groups attest the Internet has had a major impact on the ability of groups to connect with other groups; 30% of American religious activists declare the Internet has had a major impact on groups' ability to find people to take leadership roles.

Multi-method approaches to studying the online-offline community connection

Presently, the Internet serves as an integral sphere of everyday life. It is embedded to some degree in many people's existence and daily routines. Researchers must move toward a nuanced consideration of how these technologies and spaces have also become embedded in religious culture. The Internet is not a completely separate space; it is integrated by its proximity in many religious behaviors and rituals. As part of everyday social life, it is also a central part of religious existence. While social media has been around for several years, only within the past few years have religious scholars given considerable attention to how the Internet affects religion in these spaces. Studies of Facebook and Twitter have been difficult to conduct due to challenges in data collection and gaining permission from users to study their interactions in such spaces, and the difficulty of developing tools and methods to study such platforms. Mobile media and applications represent other underexplored digital religious contexts. Considerably more attention needs to be paid to the integration of the offline context to the online, as well as the need to gain a better understanding of how embedded the Internet has become in the digital ecosystems of religious organizations and communities. For example, of Aupers (2010) work on Technopaganism converts online documented the way practicing religion online can shape individuals and communities' worldviews. Some scholars have successfully adapted approaches developed in other disciplines to study religious digital contexts, especially as they relate to big data. Hence, within the past five years there has been a strong emphasis on moving towards the use of more quantitative methods in the study of digital religion.

In the first 10–20 years much of the research related to religion online was primarily qualitative. Many scholars started to understand that if large claims were going to be made, they needed to draw on larger and broader data sets. Because digital tools have been developed for gathering user profile information on Twitter and Facebook, appropriately large data sets are now becoming available. There needs to be much more research on religious use of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and religious apps to comprehend how these innovations have developed and impacted religious practices and understanding.

Current research sees the need for more longitudinal studies on the relationship between religious groups' adoption and adaptation of online contexts. Such work requires a careful study of 'the social and institutional implications of practicing religion online; and what impact, if any, this will have on the construction of community, authority and authenticity in wider culture' (Campbell and Lövheim 2011, 11). Scholars have also recognized the fact that certain methods are more suited for

Downloaded by [KU Leuven University Library] at 23:59 30 May 2016

studying theoretical issues, drawing on approaches taken in previous studies of mass media and religion and adapting them to digital religion research. Cheong, Huang, and Poon (2011), for example, employ ethnography and textual analysis in both online and offline contexts to investigate religious leaders' discourse about the affordance of new media, in order to explore ways the Internet can both solidify and undermine traditional forms of religious authority in both spheres.

Some important studies taking a more quantitative and large-scale approach have emerged. Vis, van Zoonen, and Mihelj (2011), for example, studied the rise of the *Fitna* video in order to understand how Muslim individuals and groups negotiate with the cosmopolitanism of Islam represented through YouTube videos. Hutchings's (2011) work on online movement considered how Christian groups are using digital storytelling to express religious identity. Haughey's and Campbell's (2013) work on Facebook users sought to expressly understand online memorialization. Campbell's and DeLashmutt's (2013) research looked at what are called multi-site churches – churches that function as network of sites overseen by a parent congregation and have a strong online presence – to look at ecclesiological and rhetorical patterns of how members make cognitive links between their online participation and religious identity. These studies illustrate the important blending of online/offline contexts, but pose serious challenges as well. They also often draw on vast amounts of online data that require digital tools to help categorize, sort, and analyze the findings and correlations yielded by such research.

Future trends and research

By tracing the emergence of Digital Religion studies and the evolution of religious community online and offline, this article demonstrates the scholarly recognition that technology alone was not shaping religion. The rise of new social practices of religious users and organizations also played a significant role in the shape of digital religion. As scholars began broadening their theoretical understanding of the relationship of online and offline religion, this led to a deeper awareness of the intersection between religion and the digital. Now we see a push towards more refined methodological approaches and theoretical reflection to interpret the ways in which religion, in general, are being performed and is shaping the Internet. From this review of the past three decades of research we note that much of the scholarship studying religious community online has centered around four core questions.

In the first stage scholars asked if it were possible to describe the religious groups emerging online as a 'community,' and if so, could this truly be seen as an authentic religious community? Sociologists documented the fact that the Internet was giving rise to unexpected forms of religious expression many users describe as genuine. Horsfall (2000) showed that not only were members of traditional religions such as Catholicism using the Internet as a space for community interactions and building, but newer religions such as the Church of Scientology, The Unification Church and Falun Gong were doing so as well.

In the second stage of research most researchers accepted the claim that religious communities online could be viewed by members as authentic, though representing a new form often quite different in its social and communicative practices than

Downloaded by [KU Leuven University Library] at 23:59 30 May 2016

traditional religious communities. Here scholars tried to outline characteristics or unique markers of these communities. Communities online revealed a fluidity and dynamism which challenged traditional religious social boundaries and authorities. Indeed, the online setting and anonymity lowered social constraints to create a more open communication. Bunt (2003) documented this phenomenon, observing how Muslim online communities often discussed issues traditionally considered taboo – such as sexuality and marriage – on 'ask the imam' websites.

In stage three scholars began to highlight the ways online and offline communities could and should be seen as part of a continuum. Many users do not see the Internet and online community as separate or disconnected from their offline social life, networks, and patterns of being. Campbell (2012) summarized comparative work on how Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant communities use the Internet and its impact upon religious authority, noting that while hierarchical Catholic and Orthodox traditions typically advocate to a 'top-down approach to decision-making' regarding an appropriate use of the Internet, Protestants who place a higher value on self-responsibility promote a more 'responsible, individual decision-making' in Internet use (438).

Current work often emphasizes the integration of online and offline spheres and practices and aims to explore more deeply the relationship between online and offline religious community and how members perceive and integrate their religiosity between these contexts. Researchers recognize the fact that the Internet is embedded in the everyday, with online activities integrating offline issues and interests. Online allows offline groups to extend their interactions and investments in their members and structures, flow between two contexts, and allows for experimentation in communication and relations that can strengthen or challenge either context. For example, Campbell's and Delashmutt's (2013) study of multi-site churches' use of technology demonstrated how online services and groups help members consolidate and affirm their feelings of belonging. Vitullo (2016) demonstrates how sharing online prayer requests in Facebook groups can intensify investment in community religious activities and create a feeling of intimacy.

However, there is more work to be done to understand the complexities of how religious communal life is engaged within digital culture, and future researchers should consider different investigative approaches. While some research work has been done on Catholic communities' Internet use and perception, much of this work has been institutionally focused, rather than exploring the beliefs and practices of Catholic believers. Very little has been written about the presence and influence of Catholic bloggers and unofficial Catholic communities online, therefore, more studies concerning non-institutional Catholic discourse online are needed to more fully capture Catholic community new media practices and the ways they relate to, or offer alternatives to, the official Catholic Church online presence.

Related to this is another area for further exploration, i.e. how online community practice does or may shape offline religious communities. Early studies of community online focused on how online groups often sought to replicate offline patterns of practice and communication as they sought to import their religious traditions online. This means online communities with links to specific offline religious communities often intentionally, or unintentionally, reflect traits of these offline institutions. Yet research has also shown that, due to digital media affordances enabling the transcendence of

Downloaded by [KU Leuven University Library] at 23:59 30 May 2016

time-space boundaries and structural hierarchies, online communities exhibit uniquely flexible and more dynamic traits than traditional structures. This means online communities are programmed with a very different DNA than offline ones. This raises questions about the future of religious institutions seeking to exist in and utilize both contexts, while failing to recognize that structures and patterns of practice in the online and offline are very different and potentially even conflictual. As we have seen (Noomen et al. 2011), while the Catholic Church seeks to replicate official and hierarchical communications online, members may establish multifaceted and creative online communication experiments that exploit the social affordance offered by the Internet to create spaces that function very differently from official forms. For this reason future works need to look not just at how offline institutions engage the Internet, but at the long-term impact these engagements may have on virtual communities affiliated with them.

Moreover, empirical data is needed on what people actually do online, taking an audience research perspective. More attention has been given to religious communities and institutions and what they do online, but we need to learn how the current online practices of these institutions are perceived by their users. Vitullo (2016), who compares the offline correspondences and effects of the institutional online communication of a spiritual community on its members' everyday lives, states this is not just a matter of impact, but more specifically, of how members read the messages and digital opportunities provided, and how they interpret and exploit them within the larger frame of digital culture.

In conclusion, comparative work on the communication strategies and approaches of religious institutions, communities, and individuals is needed in order to consider and document how they communicate offline and/or online, and whether or not they integrate the two spheres. The online activities of some religious institutions and communities have been well documented, but the influences of Internet communication on religious individuals' offline patterns and practices has not. Attention should be given not only to what religious Internet users do online, but how they interpret and perceive these practices in relation to their broader religious and social identities. This will enable Digital Religion studies to connect and contribute to wider debates about how technologies are changing self-perception, including personal religious behaviors and practice in the context of post-secular society, such as seen in investigations like those of Aupers (2010). Similar work will help scholars identify what aspects of Internet use simply extend established practices, born out of offline patterns or contexts, and what is truly unique about the practices and meaning-making related to Internet use and spirituality in the postmodern era.

Disclosure statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of this article.

Notes on contributors

Heidi A. Campbell is Associate Professor of Communication and affiliate faculty in Religious Studies at Texas A&M University. For over two decades she has studied religion and the internet and the impact new media technologies on religious communities. Her research has been cited in numerous scholarly sources and media

Downloaded by [KU Leuven University Library] at 23:59 30 May 2016

outlets including the BBC, CBC, *The Guardian*, *LA Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today*. She is director of the Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture Studies (http://digitalreligion.tamu.edu), author of over 70 articles and author/editor of 7 books including *Exploring Religious Community Online* (Peter Lang, 2005), *When Religion Meets New Media* (Routledge, 2010), *Digital Religion* (Routledge, 2013) and *Networked Theology* (Baker Academic, 2016).

Alessandra Vitullo is a PhD Candidate at the Department of Philosophical and Social Science at the University of Rome 'Tor Vergata'. Her PhD research is focused on the comparison of the Internet usage made by traditional and new religious communities. She is member of the 'Center for the Study and Documentation of Religions and Political Institutions in Post-Secular Society' (CSPS). Among her publications: *Religioni e internet: evangelizzazione o reincantamento del mondo*, (Il Mulino 2013), *Fabrizio Vecoli, La religione ai tempi del Web* (Testo e Senso, n.14/2013). She is also author of the book *Tracce di Orientalismo, Le rappresentazioni sociali della rivolta egiziana nella.*

Downloaded by [KU Leuven University Library] at 23:59 30 May 2016

References

Arasa, D., Cantoni L., and L.A. Ruiz. 2010. *Religious Internet Communication. Facts, Trends and Experiences in the Catholic Church*. Rome: EDUSC.

Armfield G. G., and R. L. Holbert. 2003. "The Relationship Between Religiosity and Internet Use." *Journal of Media and Religion* 2: 129–144.

Arasa, D. 2011. "Contribution of New Media to Media Communication of the Church." In *Religious Message in Media*, edited by T. Rončáková and D. Lysý, 41–58. Rome: EDUSC.

Aupers, S., and D. Houtman. 2010. *Religions of Modernity. Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital*. Leiden: Brill.

Aupers, S. 2010. "'Where the Zeroes Meet the Ones' Exploring the Affinity Between Magic And Computer Technology," In *Religions of Modernity. Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital*, edited by S. Aupers and D. Houtman. Leiden: Brill.

Babin, P., and A. Zukowski. 2002. *The Gospel in Cyberspace. Nurturing Faith in the Internet Age*. Chicago: Loyola Press.

Brasher, B. 2004. *Give Me That Online Religion*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

Barker, E. 2005. "Crossing the Boundary: New Challenges to Religious Authority and Control as a Consequence of Access to the Internet." In *Religion and Cyberspace*, edited by M. Hojsgaard and M. Warburg, 67–85. London: Routledge.

Barzilai-Nahon, K., and G. Barzilai. 2005. "Cultured Technology: Internet and Religious Fundamentalism." *The Information Society* 21: http://www.indiana.edu/~tisj/21/1/ab-barzilai.html

Brooke, T. 1997. *Virtual Gods*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House.

Bunt, G. 2003. *Islam in the Digital Age: E-jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments*. London: Pluto Press.

Campbell, H. 2003. "Congregation of the Disembodied," *In Virtual Morality*, edited by M. Wolf, 179–199. London: Peter Lang Publishing.

Campbell, H. 2005a. *Exploring Religious Community Online, We Are One in the Network*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Campbell, H. 2005b. "Making Space for Religion in Internet Studies." *The Information Society: An International Journal* 21: 309–315.

Campbell, H. 2005c. "Considering Spiritual Dimensions within Computer-mediated Communication Studies." *New Media and Society* 7: 111–135.

Campbell, H. 2007, "Who's Got the Power? Religious Authority and the Internet," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*. http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol12/issue3/campbell.html.

Campbell, H. 2010. *When Religion Meets New Media*. London: Routledge.

Campbell, H., and M. Delashmutt. 2013. "Studying Technology & Ecclesiology in Online Multi-site Worship." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29: 267–285.

Campbell, H., and O. Golan. 2011. "Creating Digital Enclaves: Negotiation of the Internet amongst Bounded Religious Community." *Media, Culture & Society* 33: 709–724.

Campbell, H., and M. Lovheim. 2011. "Rethinking the Online-offline Connection in Religion Online." *Information, Communication & Society* 18: 1083–1096.

Campbell, H. 2012. "How Religious Communities Negotiate New Media Religiously," In *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture. Perspectives, Practices and Futures*, edited by P.H. Cheong, P. Fisher-Nielsen, S. Gelfren, and C. Ess. New York: Peter Lang.

Cantoni L., Stefania, M., and S. De Ascanis. 2012. "Online Communication of the Catholic World Youth Days." In *Reflecting on Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, edited by K. Griffin, and R. Raj, 130–144. Arnhem: ATLAS.

Cantoni, L. and S. Zyga. 2007. "The Use of Internet Communication by Catholic Congregations: A Quantitative Study." *Journal of Media and Religion* 6: 291–309.

Cantoni, L., Rapetti, E., Tardini, S., Vannini, S., and D., Arasa. 2012. "PICTURE: The Adoption of ICT by Catholic Priest", In *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture. Perspectives, Practices and Futures*, edited by Cheong, P. H., P. Fisher-Nielsen, S. Gelfren, and C. Ess, 131–149. New York: Peter Lang.

Castells, M. 1996. *The Rise of Networked Society*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Cheong, P. H., and J. Poon. 2009. "Weaving Webs of Faith: Examining Internet Use and Religious Communication among Chinese Protestant Transmigrants." *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 2: 189–207.

Cheong, P. H. 2010. "*Faith Tweets: Ambient Religious Communication and Microblogging Rituals.*" *M/C Journal: A Journal of Media and Culture* 24. http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/viewArticle/223.

Cheong, P. H., P. Fisher-Nielsen, S. Gelfren, and C. Ess. 2012. *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture. Perspectives, Practices and Futures*. New York: Peter Lang.

Cheong P.H., S.H. Huang, and J.P.H. Poon. 2011. "Cultivating Online and Offline Pathways to Enlightenment: Religious Authority in Wired Buddhist Organizations." *Information, Communication & Society* 14: 1160–1180.

Cheruvallil-Contractor and S. Shakkour. 2015. *Digital Methodologies in the Sociology of Religion*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Ciolek, M.T. 2004. "Online Religion: The Internet and Religion," In *The Internet Encyclopedia*, edited by H. Bidgoli, 798–811. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Cowan, D. E. 2005. *Cyberhenge: Modern Pagans on the Internet*. Routledge: New York/London.

Cobb, J. 1998. *Cybergrace: The Research for God in the Digital World*. New York: Crown Publisher.

Dawson, L., and D. Cowan. 2004. *Religion Online. Finding Faith on the Internet*. New York: Routledge.

Fernback, J. 2002. "Community as a Commodity: Empowerment and Consumerism on the Web." In *Internet Research Annual Volume I: Selected Papers from the Association of Internet Researcher Conference 2000-2002*, edited by Mia Consalvo, et al, 224–230. New York: Peter Lang.

Gelfgren, S. and T. Hutchings. 2014. "The Virtual Construction of the sacred–Representation and Fantasy in the Architecture of Second Life Churches." *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 27: 59–73.

Grieve, G. 2010. "Virtually Embodying the Field: Silent Online Meditation, Immersion, and the Cardean Ethnographic Method. "*Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 4. http://www.online.uni-hd.de/

Hadden, J. K., and D.E. Cowan. 2000. *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*. New York: JAI Press.

Haughey, R., and H. Campbell. 2013. "Modern-day Martyrs: Fans' Online Reconstruction of Celebrities as Divine," In *Social Media, Religion and Spirituality*, edited by D. Herbert and M. Gillispe, 103–120. Berlin: De Gruyters.

Helland, C. 2000. "Online-religion/Religion-online and Virtual Communitas," In *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, edited by J.K. Hadden and D.E. Cowan, 205–233. New York: JAI Press.

Downloaded by [KU Leuven University Library] at 23:59 30 May 2016

Helland, C. 2007. "Diaspora on the Electronic Frontier: Developing Virtual Connections with Sacred Homelands." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication (Special Issue on Religion and the Internet)* 12: 956–976.

Hjarvard, S. M. 2008. "The Mediatization of Religion: A theory of the Media as Agents of Religious Change." *Northern Lights: Film & Media Studies Yearbook* 6: 9–26.

Hojsgaard, M., and W. Warburg. 2005. *Religion and Cyberspace*. London, UK: Routledge.

Hoover S. M., and K. Lundby. 1997. *Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Horsfall, S. 2000. "How Religious Organizations Use the Internet: a Preliminary Inquiry." In *Religion and the Social Order*, edited by H. William and Swatos, J. Brill: Leiden.

Hutchings, T. 2011. "Contemporary Religious Community and the Online Church." *Information, Communication and Society* 14: 1118–1135.

Hutchings, T. 2012. "Creating Church Online: Networks and Collectivities in Contemporary Christianity." In *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture. Perspectives, Practices and Futures*, edited by P.H. Cheong, P. Fisher-Nielsen, S. Gelfren, and C. Ess. New York: Peter Lang.

Jacobs, S. 2007. "Virtually Sacred: The Performance of Asynchronous Cyber-Rituals in Online Spaces." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12: 1103–1121.

Jantz, G.L. 1998. *Hidden Dangers of the Internet: Using It Without Abusing It*. Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publications.

Jenkins, S. 2008. "Rituals and Pixels. Experiments in Online Church." *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 3: http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/volltexte/2008/8291/pdf/jenkins.pdf

Johns, M.D. 2015. "Facebook Gets Religion: Fund-Raising by Religious Organizations on Social Networks," In *The Changing World Religion Map Sacred Places, Identities, Practices and Politics*, edited by S. D. Brunn. New York: Springer.

Jones, S. 1997. *Virtual Culture*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Katz, J., and R. Rice. 2002. *Social Consequences of Internet Use: Access Involvement and Interaction*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Larsen, E. 2001. *Cyberfaith: How Americans Pursue Religion Online*. Washington (DC): Pew Internet & American Life Project.

Lövheim, M. 2004. "Young People, Religious Identity, and the Internet." In *Religion Online. Finding Faith on the Internet*, edited by L. Dawson and D. Cowan D., 59–73. New York: Routledge.

Lövheim, M. 2005. "Young People and the Use of the Internet as Transitional Space." *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 1: http://online.uni-hd.de/

Lövheim, M. 2006. "A Space Set Apart? Young People Exploring the Sacred on the Internet," In *Implications of the Sacred in (Post)Modern Media*, edited by Johanna S-S., Knut L., and Raimo S., 255–272. Göteborg: Nordicom.

Miczek, N. 2008. "Online Rituals in Virtual Worlds: Christian Online Services between Dynamics and Stability." *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 3: http://archiv.ub.uniheidelberg.de/volltextserver/volltexte/2008/8293/pdf/nadja.pdf

Noomen, I., S. Aupers, and D. Houtman. 2011. "In Their Own Image?" *Information Communication & Society* 14: 1097–1117.

O'Leary, S. 1996. "Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64: 781–808.

O'Leary, S., and B. Brasher. 1996. "The Unknown God of the Internet: Religious Communications from the Ancient Agora to the Virtual Forum," In *Philosophical Perspectives on Computer-mediated Communication*, edited by C. Ess, 233–269. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Pew Research Center. 2011. *"The civic and community engagement of religiously active Americans."* http://www.pewinternet.org/2011/12/23/the-civic-and-community-engagement-of-religiously-active-americans/

Downloaded by [KU Leuven University Library] at 23:59 30 May 2016

Pew Research Center. 2014. "*Religion and Electronic Media: One-in-Five Americans Share Their Faith Online.*" http://www.pewforum.org/files/2014/11/New-Media-07-27-for-web.pdf

Rashi, T. and M. McCombs. 2015. "Agenda Setting, Religion and New Media: The Chabad Case Study." *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 4: 126–145.

Rheingold, H. 1993. *The Virtual Community*. New York: Harper.

Silverstone, R., and L. Haddon. 1996. "Design and Domestication of ICTs: Technical Change and Everyday Life," In *Communicating by Design: The Politics of Information and Communication Technologies*, edited by R. Mansel and R. Silverston, 44–74. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Spadaro, A. 2014 *Cybertheology. Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet*. Translated by Maria Way. New York: Fordham Press.

Vis, F., L. van Zoonen, L., and S. Mihelj, 2011. "Women Responding to the Anti-Islam Film *Fitna*: Voices and Acts of Citizenship on YouTube." *Feminist Review* 97: 110–129.

Vitullo, A. 2014. "Religioni e Internet: Evangelizzazione o Reincantamento del Mondo?" In *Rapporto sull'Analfabetismo Religioso in Italia*, edited by A. Melloni, 355–367. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Vitullo, A. 2016. "Cristiani Multi-site." Paper presented at 33 Academic Year Humanistic and Scientific Session, Castel Sant'Angelo University, Rome, Italy.

Vitullo, A. In press 2016. "New Age Goes online. How a Spiritual Community Constructs and Integrates Its Identity on Internet." *Methaodos Revista de Ciencias Sociales* 4.

Wilson, W. 2000. *The Internet Church*. Nashville, TN: Word Publishing.

Wellman, B. 2001. "Physical Place and Cyberplace: The rise of Personalized Networking." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 25: 227–252.

Wertheim, M. 1999. *The Pearly Gate of Cyberspace. A History of Space from Dante to Internet*. New York: Norton Paperback.

Young, G. 2004. "Reading and Praying Online: The Continuity of Religion Online and Online Religion in Internet Christianity." In *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, edited by L. Dawson and D. Cowan, 93–106. New York, NY: Routledge.

Zaleski, J. 1997. *The Soul of Cyberspace: How Technology is Changing Our Spiritual Lives*. San Francisco: Harper.

Downloaded by [KU Leuven University Library] at 23:59 30 May 2016