Who’s Got the Power? Religious Authority and the Internet

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While many themes have been explored in relation to religion online—ritual, identity construction, community—what happens to religious authority and power relationships within online environments is an area in need of more detailed investigation. In order to move discussions of authority from the broad or vague to the specific, this article argues for a more refined identification of the attributes of authority at play in the online context. This involves distinguishing between different layers of authority in terms of hierarchy, structure, ideology, and text. The article also explores how different religious traditions approach questions of authority in relation to the Internet. Through a qualitative analysis of three sets of interviews with Christians, Jews, and Muslims about the Internet, we see how authority is discussed and contextualized differently in each religious tradition in terms of these four layers of authority.

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Introduction

Ten years ago, talk of religion online was new and sexy. Articles such as Wired’s feature on technopaganism (Davis, 1995) and the Time cover story “Finding God on the Web” (Chama, 1996) surveying a range of phenomena from Catholicism to Zoroastrians online began to fire the public’s imagination about how the face of religion might be beginning to change. This was soon followed by the first academic studies of religion online, such as O’Leary’s (1996) work on the ritual use of cyber-space as sacred space by Christians and Pagans. In the mid-1990s, researchers started to invest time and interest in the role religion was playing in a variety of online environments. Now, a decade later, a substantial collection of studies and investigations is coming together, as the meeting of religion and the Internet is increasingly recognized as an important area within Internet studies (Baym, 2005). Through a variety of methodologies (e.g., from ethnographies of online religious communities to large scale surveys of religious Internet users), diverse themes are being explored concerning how religious practice is being transformed due to the growth of the Internet. (For a thorough literature review, see Campbell, 2006.)
One emergent theme concerns the changing nature of authority in online religious contexts. While many issues have been explored in relation to religious engagement online, such as online rituals, identity construction, and changing definitions of community, what happens to religious authority and power relationships within online environments has not. This lack has not gone completely unnoticed, however; scholars have highlighted authority as an important area for exploration in studies of religion and the Internet. For instance, Dawson’s early work highlights religious “control and authority” as areas of special concern (2000, pp. 43-44). Yet little theoretical and empirical work has focused exclusively on the topic of religious authority within online environments.

Recent studies (Barker, 2005; Barzali-Nahon & Barzali, 2005; Cowan, 2005) suggest that the Internet has the potential to both affirm and threaten traditional authority in different online religious communities. However, these studies do not directly define or contextualize the concept of authority; it is simply employed as term to describe how the Internet influences religion. Thus there is a need for a more refined investigation and explanation of what is meant when the term “authority” is used in reference to online contexts.

This article focuses on the questions raised by religious engagement online in relation to religious authority. It seeks to offer a more concrete understanding of how the concept of authority may be defined online. The article aims to accomplish this task by showing how religion online provides an important space for studying what will be referred to as “multiple layers of authority.” Many studies of religion and the Internet employ the concept of authority in broad and overarching ways, yet it will be argued that the perception of authority varies across different religious traditions. Thus, a more focused awareness of what is meant by “authority” in different religious contexts is needed. By investigating and comparing interviews from three religious groups—Jews, Muslims, and Christians—where questions or issues related to authority arise, the basis for making informed claims about the impact of the Internet on religious authority is established.

The central argument here is that the question of authority in religious engagement online involves investigating multiple layers of authority. It is not enough to say that the Internet transforms or challenges traditional authority; rather, researchers must identify what specific form or type of authority is being affected. Is it the power position of traditional religious leaders? Is it the established systems by which policy decisions are made and information is passed on to community members? Is it the corporate ideology of the community? Or is it the role and interpretation of official religious rhetoric and teaching? Studying authority online involves identifying these multiple layers in order to discover whether it is religious roles, systems, beliefs, or sources that are being affected. This multi-layered approach to authority seeks to offer a new and more subtle way for researchers to study questions related to authority online.

This exploration begins with a general discussion of the concept of authority and how it is approached in this article. This is followed by an overview of how research
on religion online has approached the topic of authority. This review sets the stage for highlighting four levels of authority at play in online contexts: religious hierarchy, structure, ideology, and text. Qualitative analysis of interviews of members from the Christian, Muslim, and Jewish faiths then provides data for investigating how the Internet and online engagement may influence different traditions’ understandings of religious authority. The article concludes with a critical discussion of how these four layers of authority create research foci in need of further investigation.

Approaching Authority

The question of authority is often raised in relation to the Internet, as authority is seen as a key area to be challenged by network communications. Indeed, a search and content analysis of articles published in the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication between June 1995 and July 2006 finds the concept of authority mentioned in 104 articles. This demonstrates an evident interest in authority within Internet studies. Yet while ideas of “authority” are noted in these articles, only one article defines what is meant by the term. Ruggiero and Winch’s (2005) article on journalistic mistrust of the Internet focuses on the idea that journalists possess a “cultural authority.” Thus, they link their discussion to Starr’s definition (1982) of cultural authority “as the power to define and describe reality” in order to highlight to importance of the role of the journalist in society.

In the other articles, the concept of “authority” is used in a variety of ways. A review of the other 103 articles finds that the dominant use of authority—almost half of all references—can be linked to discussions of official structures, systems, or hierarchies (e.g., Ahuja & Carley, 1998; Wang & Archer, 2004). The second most common use of “authority” involves referencing a specific role (e.g., Breen, 1997; Holohan & Garg, 2005) or a specific individual/entity and his/her position of power (e.g., Dahan, 2003; Greenleaf, 1996). This is followed by authority employed as a general concept, often in relation to the term “power” (e.g., Aycock, 1995; Denegri-Knott, 2004). In several instances, “authority” refers to the idea of ideological authority, such as references to moral authority (Sofield, 2002) or a “higher authority” (e.g., Mnookin, 1996) that are linked to issues of governance. Finally, a few articles use “authority” in reference to online and offline texts or information (e.g., Barbatis, Fegan, & Hansen, 1999). This clearly shows that authority means many things to different researchers, and there appears to be no unified understanding about what is meant when the concept of “authority” is taken up in studies of the Internet. Therefore, an in-depth discussion of what is meant by the concept of authority is needed.

Within the JCMC articles that mention “authority,” multiple types or forms of power relationships are highlighted. In light of this we turn to the classic work of Weber (1947). In his discussion on how authority cultivates legitimacy, Weber states that “it is useful to classify the types of authority according to the kind of claim to legitimacy typically made by each” (p. 325). He identifies three types of “pure legitimate authority:” legal, traditional, and charismatic authority (p. 328). Legal
authority is based on a belief in the “legality” of patterns and normative rule, where loyalty is given to a legally established impersonal order. Traditional authority is established by a belief in the “sanctity of immemorial traditions,” where obedience is given to the person who occupies this traditionally sanctioned position of authority. Charismatic authority is based on devotion to an individual who exhibits a particular characteristic, ideal, or exemplary quality that motivates others to adhere to the normative patterns sanctioned by that individual. These distinctions highlight three different and important manifestations of authority. Authority may be based on allegiance to a legally established system, a certain position or role established through a particular tradition or history, or to the personification of a specific belief. At a basic level, this sets up three distinctions related to the concept of authority: That is, authority as grounded in a system, in a role, or as an embodied value-belief. Weber thus places emphasis on the means through which authority is conveyed, rather than on the end result of such authority.

Weber’s distinction is important because it highlights the need to distinguish between different forms of authority. It should be noted that religious authority differs from the general concept of authority, in that it draws on a particular form of legitimization, often linked to a divine source. Yet, even with this unique feature, it is argued that religious authority still references systems, roles, and personified beliefs as manifestations of authority. We will see that these same distinctions of authority come into play in research on religion online. It is not the intention of this article to provide an exhaustive discussion of differing definitions of authority or the relationship between power and authority. However the need for more a detailed investigation of the concept of authority within Internet studies is highlighted, and a starting point for such a discussion is offered. Thus in the sections that follow, a distinctive multilayered approach to authority is revealed.

“Authority” in Studies of Religion Online

Authority, in many respects, has been an unnamed area within some studies of religion online. Dawson (2000) first highlighted three areas in which religious authority, specifically in “cults” online, is challenged by online religious activity. These include the potential “proliferation of misinformation and disinformation” (p. 43) by opponents of particular religious groups or disgruntled insiders; the “loss of control over religious materials” by religious organizations; and providing “new opportunities for grassroots forms of witnessing” (p. 44), thus encouraging the rise of unofficial or alternative voices in contrast to traditional discourses. While Dawson does not explore these questions beyond simply noting their importance, these three areas anticipate the argument made here about the need to explore multiple aspects of religious roles, structures, and texts related to authority.

In the past six years, investigations making claims about the connection between online and offline religion have often referred to—or inferred that—issues of power, authority, and control were areas of concern for religious groups, claiming that
online practices inevitably challenge traditional religion both in belief and practice. Interestingly, most of this work is connected to studies of new religious movements (NRMs) online or ethnographic investigations of rituals and practices in Pagan and cultic groups online (e.g., Berger & Ezzy, 2004; Introvigne, 2000). Yet only recently has the concept of “authority” been explicitly focused on or spotlighted as a research theme in studies of religion online. Hojsgaard and Warburg’s recent collection Religion and Cyberspace (2005) is notable in offering several chapters that directly deal with themes related to religious authority.

Piff and Warburg (2005) have discussed authority struggles in the Baha’i community online, although without actually using the term “authority.” Using the concept of “plausibility alignment” from McMillan (1988), they focus on how a social group “maintains a correspondence between its worldview and information impinging on the group from the social context in which it resides” (Piff & Warburg, 2005, p. 86). They argue that an online group can take discussions that are normally reserved for official administrators into a public forum and offer their own interpretations of religious beliefs. This results in meanings that the “stewards of the public image would wish to deemphasize” (p. 97). Their study shows that tensions can arise between religious institutions and members as online conversations create a space and process whereby official teachings may be challenged.

Barker’s study of NRMs online (2005) focuses on how “new religions find authority structure being affected by the arrival of cyberspace” (p. 68). Here, “authority structure” refers to an “organizational structure” that relates to a “patterned structure of relationships which consist of a charismatic leader at the apex, transmitting information and command to trusted lieutenants, who in turn pass the information down a hierarchy chain of command to grass-roots level” (p. 70). Online discussion forums may subvert this structure, or religious organizations may in turn infiltrate these groups or create alternative forums to reinforce their established structure. This study shows how religious authority as a hierarchical structure may respond to its members’ Internet activities.

Finally, Herring (2005) has looked at authority in an online Christian group’s efforts to construct a group theology, which requires them to negotiate traditional views of religious authority based on a Biblical passage in Romans. The moderator holds the key authority position within the group, in accordance with its charter, so members were encouraged to submit to the rule of the moderator as a representative of the “governing authorities” that are put in their place by God to govern society (p. 158). Affirming the moderator’s authority served as a tool to legitimate that the group was acting in line with scriptural principles. Herring’s collection of studies highlights religious organization and roles as a central concern within discussions of religious authority. Similarly, Cowan’s (2005) work on contemporary Paganism online discussed how the Internet enables individuals to construct their identities online in order to make claims to being a “Pagan authority” (pp. 166-167). Here “authority” is established not by an official group but through a communal recognition of expertise.
Each of these studies employs a different concept of authority in their investigations in order to ask questions that seek to identify who is recognized by the group as experts: those in governance, or those who function as “stewards of the public image.” The focus here is on authority as a specific role or structure. However, as discussed previously, the idea of authority involves not only people, but texts, ideologies, and patterns of interaction or being. This highlights the need for a clearer definition, one which recognizes that multiple layers of authority are at work online. It is also important to note that many of these studies focus on NRMs, which begs the question: Do these studies provide sufficient basis to make claims about how traditional religions have approached the concept of authority in relation to the Internet? Thus our discussion of authority must consider how traditional monotheistic religions may be studied through a multi-layered definitional framework.

**Layers of Authority Online in Three Traditional Religions**

By comparing three sets of interviews with Christians, Muslims, and Jews, we can begin to see how discussions of authority differ based on the religious community under study.

A thematic qualitative analysis was applied to three sets of interviews with members of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian faith communities. First, a set of seven interviews was analyzed from a research study of membership in online Christian communities (see Campbell, 2005). Interviewees were members of two email-based communities; four were members of an online community linked to the Anglican/Episcopal tradition, and three were affiliated with a Charismatic/Evangelical Christian group focused on the spiritual gift of prophecy. Interviews were conducted between 1999 and 2000, and questions explored how online engagement influenced members’ perceptions of and involvement in their offline faith communities.

The second set analyzed involved seven interviews conducted in 2004 with Muslim students at Al Qasemi College, a Sufi Muslim college in Baqa al Garbia, Israel. These interviews focus on how student perceptions of their Muslim faith influenced their use and understanding of technology, especially the Internet. The third set of interviews involved seven Jewish students and faculty from the University of Haifa in Israel engaged in research or study related to the intersection of Judaism and technology. These interviews, also conducted in 2004, ask questions about how Jewish culture and religious faith guides personal and corporate responses to media technologies.

Each set of interviews was coded for instances when interviewees commented on the following: the influence of the Internet on religious hierarchy (roles or perceptions of recognized religious or community leaders), religious structures (community structures, patterns of practice, or official organizations), religious ideology (commonly held beliefs, ideas of faith, or shared identity) or religious texts (recognized teachings or official religious books such as the Koran, Torah, or Bible). Specifically, coding involved identifying comments directly related to these four layers of authority.
As each set of interviews involves a different set of questions, a direct statistical correlation and comparison of the analysis is not possible. However, through performing a qualitative analysis on interviews with overlapping areas of questioning, it is possible to identify some common clustering of themes related to authority and the Internet. Together, the three sets of interviews provide an interesting comparison of how people from different religions respond to the potential and actual influence of Internet technology on their tradition. Through highlighting the dominant findings of the three interviews, we see that within each religious tradition, different layers emerged as central areas of concern. The findings of these interviews can be linked to current and previous research and help set an agenda for areas that need to be explored further.

Christianity and Authority
In interviews with Christian online community members, remarks dealing with all four areas of religious authority were found. Comments on religious hierarchy pinpointed members’ opinions of their offline church pastor and their use of the Internet. In two instances, pastors were described as ambivalent towards the Internet and members’ religious engagement online, and in three cases, ministers were described as interested, yet too busy to become personally involved in online interactions. As a homemaker member of the Charismatic/Evangelical online community stated:

Our pastor has e-mail…. But he doesn’t have the time to really search out fellowship or information online. But he says he really appreciates me forwarding him different things that are happening in other parts of the church online, or even different words (of prophecy) that I feel are appropriate for the (local) body. (Personal interview, June 6, 1999)

In reference to religious structure members compared the character or behavioral patterns of their online community with their offline local church. Online community, in four interviews, provided a way to critique interpersonal patterns or relationships and the function of organizational structures such as vestries or ministry teams within local faith communities. As a lawyer and Charismatic/Evangelical community member stated:

We’re a pretty small fellowship and for me it’s been difficult relationship-wise… because I don’t have a family here. So I have really felt…what I was getting online from the other email posts was such an encouragement and such a different perspective than what we are seeing here locally. (Personal interview, June 18, 1999)

In three other interviews, online community was described as a bridge or helpmate to the normal patterns of local church life. A librarian and member of an online Anglican community stated:

I think the online community adds to it (local church). I mean for people who don’t understand church structure at all. It’s a wonderful way to begin to
understand how the parts and pieces of the church fit together. (Personal interview, August 31, 1999)

Frustrations and the perceived limitations of organizational structures elicited comments on religious ideology. These spotlight how the Internet facilitates and encourages a globally shared Christian identity. Members described gaining a greater understanding of the “global body of Christ”—which includes both online community and local church—as one of the most significant benefits of religious involvement online.

Finally, while only two interviewees made references to religious texts, both noted that the Bible performs functions similar to email, providing a forum for Christians to communicate words of encouragement with others in ways that transcend time and space. A nurse and online Anglican member noted:

They (people in the Bible) wrote letters to people who lived over a wide space and were diverse. And now 2000 years later you sit at a community, at a computer, and you write letters to other people and again it comes back to the word…the word made flesh…Christ with us. (Personal interview, September 6, 2006)

In these interviews a wide range of issues related to authority was highlighted. The Internet was described as a tool providing information and links to help the local church understand the shared history and common practices of the global Christian church. Thus the Internet becomes a resource for facilitating or transforming users’ understanding about the global networked faith community that may both affirm or challenge traditional ideas of religious structures and ideology. The Internet may create a new, even preferred, outlet for spiritual or social interaction. This is especially true for evangelical Christians who often advocate relationship networks over church structures, especially when the local church is seen as limited in some way. Freedom, control, and new opportunities for ministry were values highlighted by these users. Yet the Internet also provides tools for affirming traditional structures. Anglicans described the online environment as a space that encourages both personal and corporate reflection on issues important to the Anglican Communion and that aids and facilitates church structures such as vestry meetings and prayer lists. Thus the Internet was characterized as providing support for traditional structures, while also creating a space for critique of offline churches, often evaluated on the basis of members’ experience within online Christian community.

One important issue that emerged in these interviews is that online religious ideology is seen as global, rather than local. Experiences online bring members awareness of the greater “body of Christ” or “Church with a capital C.” Members felt that the local church often holds a limited view of the Church, and as one homemaker stated, that online community “gives you a perspective that you can’t have as local church… gives you a worldwide perspective” (personal interview, June 18, 1999). Individuals described themselves as a “go-between” or “bridge” between their online communities and offline church, helping to create greater awareness of the nuances of Christendom. Belonging to and membership in this global
community is based on perceived relationship and personal connections more than official affiliations. This obviously challenges traditional definitions of Church membership and community.

Islam and Authority
In the interviews with Muslim students from Al Qasemi College, comments about authority and the Internet were linked to references to religious texts or talk of hierarchy, and specifically to responses of religious leaders to the Internet. All the students stressed a very positive view of the Koran, affirming the role of the text as a source of religious authority for Muslims. The Koran was described as a “support” or platform from which all knowledge and “life” proceeds. Students expressed the notion that the Koran explicitly encourages them to engage with technology and consequently the Internet. As a first-year computer science student stated, “The Koran teaches us that we have to be the best in this world, so we must learn and use technology which is part of our world” (personal interview, May 21, 2004).

Students cited seven different *suras* (verses) from the Koran that they felt justified use of, and learning about, media technology. The first verse in the Koran was referenced three times, with interviewees noting the first word “iqraa” which means “learn.” They took this as a command to provide both support for the study and use of technology and proof that Islam is not against learning about science and technology. As a student and manager of the college computer lab comments: “Islam is highly supportive of technology and development…This is not my speech; this is the speech of the Koran” (personal interview, May 21, 2004). Thus the Muslim students affirmed and relied on textual authority to support their engagement with media technology, especially the Internet.

References to religious hierarchy came either from examples of religious leaders condemning the “bad” use of the Internet or from leaders providing instruction about how the Internet might be positively used for the purpose of Islam. In both instances, religious teachers and leaders were described with respect; their opinions about the Internet are valued and viewed as offering wisdom to the community.

Two students cited examples of sermons they had heard in local mosques warning against the “negative side of the Internet.” Interestingly, this was defined as “the access to bad sites, those which are sexual or anti-Islamic sites” (personal interview, May 21, 2004). In the two instances referring to specific sermons, bad use of the Internet refers not only to that which exposes Muslims to negative moral influences but also anything which presents a negative view of Islam to online audiences. These examples highlight a concern of local religious authorities about the potential spread of negative publicity about Islam. This concern was not questioned but was affirmed by the students. As a first-year student studying religion stated: “I think teens and the youth should be careful of the media…because it can give a disadvantaged image or idea of religion” (personal interview, May 21, 2004). Religious hierarchy thus provides what is perceived to be a valued and correct insight into the possible influence of the Internet.
Two of the students interviewed were hoping to become Sufi clerics, so they provided unique insight into the role that religious authority figures may play in guiding opinions about the Internet. A fourth-year student studying religion described how, as a future religious leader, he would advise others about media technology:

I have reservations about all technology I use... The guidance (I would give) would depend on the age of the person. I wouldn’t give a young person just a verse (from the Koran) and explain it and how it relates to the media. I would just choose the program or web sites they can or should watch. For adults I would try and prove to them from the Koran why the program or site is bad. (Personal interview, May 21, 2004)

Yet this same student, who called for religious authorities to set more strict boundaries regarding technology use, also spoke very positively about using the Internet to “convert or communicate about Islam.” He stated, “If I had more time in my studies, I would be happy to be involved in doing this online.” Others also stated that while most religious leaders highlight warnings about the Internet, some encourage the use of the Internet for proselytizing. A fourth-year education student stated, “The main point made is the bad use of the Internet. But I have heard some (Muslim) teachers talk and encourage others to use the Internet to make good points about Islam and to make opinions change about Islam through communication about what is right and good” (personal interview, May 19, 2004).

These findings raise interesting issues for further exploration, such as identifying what rhetorical devices religious authorities use for making appeals about religion and technology. It seems important to consider the local context of the user community and how teachings of the local religious leaders direct or influence the choices of Internet users. In traditionally hierarchical religious communities, is it a given that certain offline religious authorities or texts will retain their roles or a measure of influence, even in the fluid boundaries of online engagement? Further reflection is needed on the role of offline hierarchy and text for Muslim Internet users.

Judaism and Authority
The interviews with Jewish students and faculty at the University of Haifa focused on religious and community teachings about technology. The interviewees represented a cross-section of the Israeli Jewish population; four described themselves as non-religious or non-observant Jews (the most dominant group in Israel), two as “Modern” Orthodox (approximately one-third of the population) and one as Ultra Orthodox (about 6% of the population). All four “secular” Jews were involved in research projects exploring Internet use among religious Jews and so provided important insights about religious belief related to the Internet.

Comments on authority were primarily linked to religious structure, specifically the role religious community plays in creating and maintaining certain systems and discourses. Religious communities in turn guide beliefs about technology. Discussion of the Internet and Judaism focused first on religious obligations and official
restrictions related to technology. The *Mitzvot* (religious rules) affiliated with *Shabbat* (the sacred day of the week, lasting from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday), the use of electricity, and certain technologies are highlighted on five occasions as examples of how Jewish law guides use of technology. “Of the 613 *Mitzvot* half deal with what to do, and the other half what not to do. They are commands and comments on ritual between man and his friends and man and his God,” explains a Ph.D. student in sociology (personal interview, June 2, 2004). These commands are recognized as guidelines for how the community should act in a variety of contexts. The Internet is described as a technology that sets new challenges for interpreting how its use relates to recognized codes of practice for religious Jews.

Notably, interviewees placed emphasis *not* on religious authority figures as the decision-makers or evaluators of the Internet; rather they framed the discussion in community terms. This was evident through collective statements such as “religious Jews are not allowed…,” “the Ultra Orthodox community will say …,” and “we Orthodox would avoid….” The community supports a system of historical precedents, religious codes, and an implied community consensus. *Religious structure* could be defined as religiously informed discourse that becomes a channel to transport official positions and teaching on technology use to the community. Interviewees made the distinction that different religious groups (Sephardic Orthodox, Ashkenazi Orthodox, Haredi/Ultra Orthodox, etc.) are unique communities, distinguishable by their ethnic roots. Yet they also stressed that groups share similar levels of religious adherence or strictness, confirming the idea that all “religious Jews” share certain beliefs and practices. This provides cohesion for individuals and helps frame a single conceptual community.

Five of the interviewees focused their comments on authority on the Ultra Orthodox community, the most conservative sect of Judaism. This group is characterized by their rejection of many aspects of modernity, a strict rule of life, and wearing the dress coverings of their ancestors from 18th century Europe. “Religion is so dominant in the Ultra orthodox community that personal or gender identity is often second to religious identity,” stated a communication master’s degree student researching Ultra Orthodox discourse about the Internet (personal interview, May 19, 2004). Because religious ideology takes precedence over other forms of identification, religion can serve as a driving force, presenting Ultra Orthodox Jews as a “community of one voice.”

Thus, for many, the Internet is a problematic technology because it encourages multiple voices and personal freedom. Initially, some rabbis within the Ultra Orthodox community banned Internet use, but its advantages in terms of allowing women to work at home made it “a ban that the public simply cannot obey” (personal interview, May 19, 2004). Yet even though the perceived value of the community won out, debate over the Internet did not go away. “No one in the Ultra Orthodox community will say the Net is ‘good’ or describe it as having advantages… If there were advantages, they would be described as personal, but not for the community” (personal interview, May 19, 2004). Therefore, use of the Internet is still contentious within many part of the community. As a professor, who is also Ultra Orthodox, stated:
Computers are stigma in my community and because of this my work could be potentially problematic…computers are not seen to be as bad as TV, but they are definitely frowned upon in some sectors… I don’t hide the work I do (with computers and the Internet) but I don’t advertise it either…I keep my work and my religion separate. (Personal interview, June 8, 2004)

In this way, the Orthodox community plays a key role, establishing a discourse that influences community perception and use of the Internet.

Modern Orthodox interviewees also stressed that religion does not directly influence Internet use. Rather as religion is to inform all of life, religious beliefs become embedded and invisible, while still guiding choices about technology. Religion is only acknowledged when it challenges or confirms a particular practice. An Orthodox master’s degree student in computational linguistics emphasized that while he did not see his religion influencing his use of computers, there was a difference between his Internet use—for work and Torah study—and the Ultra Orthodox’s critique of the Internet as a tool of entertainment: “The [Ultra] Orthodox avoid using computers (not Modern Orthodox though) for personal needs, for a job or commercial use, yes, but not for personal needs, they do not serve the Haredi” (personal interview, June 7, 2004).

The idea that the Internet empowers personal choice is an important issue related to religious authority. Two interviewees researching a university discussion forum for Orthodox users online found the Internet served as a resource for liberal discussions about religion not available to them outside the Internet. “On the one hand, they don’t want to leave religion, but on the other hand, they do want to practice it in a way that is more convenient and open for them,” especially in issues related to gender roles, dress, and sexuality (personal interview, May 26, 2004). This raises an important point about expectations of religious structure and how this might differ even within the same religious tradition. Through looking at what the aspects of authority highlighted in these interviews, specific areas and questions related to authority online are also brought to the fore.

Discussion

The above analysis shows that multiple layers or perceptions of authority can be found in the discussions of religious Internet users about their negotiation between their religious faith and Internet use. In this section, we return to a closer examination of each of the four layers—religious hierarchy, structure, ideology, and text—to highlight what has been learned from this analysis and what new areas of questioning emerge.

Religious Hierarchy

The analysis of religious hierarchy centered on comments on the roles and perceptions of religious leaders or authority figures in relation to the Internet. Comments made by practicing religious Jews and Muslims described the role of traditional
religious leaders (rabbi, imam, cleric) and their affirmed place of importance in the community as interpreter of religious knowledge and practice. Christians and non-religious/practicing Jews were more apt to reflect critically on the role and influence of religious authority figures on community belief or the practices they advocated, especially in relation to the Internet. This difference raises the issue of how the Internet may differently influence certain religious community perceptions of officially recognized religious roles.

This emphasis on the potential of the Internet to shape how users see offline religious leaders echoes the findings of two studies that also suggest that the Internet may be creating new forms of religious authority. Anderson’s (1999) study detailed the rise of three new communities of interpreters of Islamic faith and practice online: creole pioneers (or those with professional-technical qualifications and trans-national backgrounds) who “bring religious interest on-line as after-hours interests;” activist interpreters who recruit others toward certain discourses or groups and use the Internet to address a wider audience; and “officializing discourses” (or recognized leaders from governmental councils and religious groups) that affirm the “universal access and a sense of participation in a public spheres of listeners, watchers or…browsers” (p. 50). He argues that Islamic discourse is being altered by these new interpreters as the presence online and presentation of rhetoric creates a position of power that side-steps traditional channels where religious leaders are appointed and recognized. The rise of new religious authorities online is echoed by the Hartford Institute study of U.S. congregational websites. This study found that increased reliance on the Internet is changing congregational power structures, empowering previously marginalized “techies” who are taking on new leadership roles such as “church webmaster” (Thumma, 2000). Webmasters or online moderators function as new agents of authority.

Both Anderson’s (1999) and Thumma’s (2000) studies highlight the need to examine the emergence of these new roles and their influence on traditional offline authority structures. As the Internet creates potential for new religious leaders to emerge within a community, it will also become important to study how the involvement (or lack of involvement) of a religious leader with the Internet may impact his or her potential influence offline. Attention should be given to how new religious authority figures may emerge online, and what influence these religious interpreters may have within the local faith community and the tradition as a whole. This also opens up the need to consider not only authority roles but also authority structures and patterns of organization.

Religious Structures
Interviewee comments on religious authority structures focused on systems of community practice—specifically, how the community worships, follows certain codes of practice, passes along information, and stays connected. In the Christian interviews, talk of structures emphasized patterns of relationship facilitated within online religious communities that were more highly valued than the function of organizational
structures of the local church. While structures, such as vestries or ministry teams, are seen as necessary in order for the community to function, they were also described as a hindrance to social connectivity. While the Internet served as a tool to make the authority structure of the church more transparent and understandable, it was the social and spiritual network of the Church as created through the Internet that seemed to be the more valued structure. This seems to match discussions in some studies of online Christian community that do not directly investigate questions of authority online but rather highlight how the online environment seems to inform traditional views of religious structure and discourse. An example is Howard’s (2000) work on dispensationalist discourse (millennial discussions focused on “the end times”) in an evangelical online community. He highlights how traditional structures of knowing in religious communities may be challenged by online communication that “facilitates multilateral communication between disparate individuals” so that individuals who are not part of the same church context may feel connected through a shared discourse community (p. 242).

In the Jewish interviews, authority structures focused on discussion of traditional channels of authority and the role the Jewish community plays in creating and maintaining certain systems and discourses. Emphasis is placed on the recognition and interpretation of religious codes of practice (Torah, Mitzvot, the teachings of rabbis) and the role they play for the entire religious community. The community is seen to function as a single entity, where interpretation of certain texts or beliefs is not to be done by the individuals but rather agreed upon and then accepted by the community. Here, religious structure refers to the community structure, or how the religious community sets standards and dictates certain modes of interaction or belief.

Two recent studies of Ultra Orthodox use as well as conversation around the Internet highlight this communal process of how technology must come into line with established patterns of community practice and daily life. Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005) found that fundamentalist communities often “culture” a technology so that its use preserves rather than subverts their unique culture. Noting four dominant characteristics of religious fundamentalism (hierarchy, patriarchy, discipline, and seclusion), they consider how Internet technology might influence these traits. The Internet challenges religious authority in fundamentalist communities as it “creates better opportunities for feminine voices to be heard” (Barzilai-Nahon & Barzilai, 2005, p. 27). Yet the Internet also creates opportunities for online venues to “be culturally constructed in ways that adapt to the needs of a religious fundamentalist hierarchy” (p. 28).

Livio and Tenenboim’s study (2004) of female Ultra Orthodox Internet users who use the Internet for work-related tasks shows how these women use four discursive strategies to legitimize their use of the technology. These include distinguishing Internet technology from the content it caries in order to frame it as an acceptable medium, separating personal and societal effects, drawing on acceptable justifications such as statements of religious officials (e.g., approval from a rabbi),
and depoliticizing use by denying subversive implications of the technology. An important claim made by several women is that “the Internet will not change us,” because their Internet use was controlled and thereby made compatible with their form of life, so as not to challenge the beliefs of the community. In both Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai’s (2005) and Livio and Tenenboim’s (2004) studies, it was important for Ultra Orthodox users to claim and see that the Internet could be controlled. Language became a powerful tool for making a technology that was otherwise considered secular be acceptable within certain boundaries.

The discursive framing of technology as acceptable raises important questions for study of how the Internet may reinforce or subvert traditional, often unquestioned, channels of authority. The process by which official community decisions and interpretations of belief are debated, decided upon, and communicated offline within religious communities needs to be studied more carefully. These channels of authority can then be compared to those occurring online. Also, the emergence of new systems of religious authority may begin to take into account online-offline community of faith interaction. This will be a potentially important area to monitor.

Religious Ideology

Discussions of authority by interviewees often focused on constructing the image of a single or global religious community—for example, by describing the online community as the “community of one voice” or the “global body of Christ.” In the Jewish interviews, the idea that religious ideology takes precedence over other forms of identification shows that community affiliation is not only important for individuals’ personal identification, but of critical importance with respect to solidifying corporate investment and acceptance of community belief. Here we see the Internet used to confirm or control religious identity construction. But what are the more nuanced images of religious communal ideology that emerge from online interaction and religious discourse?

In the Christian interviews, a strong emphasis is placed on trying to link the local church to the global or worldwide Church. The Internet is identified as a tool to help in this process, both to conceptualize who is part of the Church and what the Church is meant to represent. Connecting online and offline Christian communities in their definition of religious ideology also stresses that members felt that it was online where the fullness of Christian community could be fully realized and experienced.

Users’ comments on the online informing the offline could point to a potential shift in how members define religious community, as understandings of community are shaped by some members’ online involvement (Campbell, 2004). Lawrence (2002) found that the Internet is affecting traditional forms of Islamic authority, especially with its tendency to emphasize global community or structures over local ones. He found that cyber-Islam employed metaphors from the discourse of traditional, conservative Islam as a way to reinforce global structures, images, and beliefs about Islam online. One example is the image of the “Straight Path” which Muslims are encouraged to find and to which they should stay connected. Its use in online
websites and texts upholds the idea that “cyberspace, like social space, to be effectively Muslim, must be monitored” in order to ensure its proper use (Lawrence, 2002, p. 240).

It is clear from the interviews that the online participants embrace and include both online and offline context in their definitions of the religious community. Yet will offline structures be willing to recognize and embrace those in online contexts as equal parts or representative of their community of faith? The emphasis of such “glocal” religious identity online is another area in need of further investigation.

**Religious Texts**

The authority of religious text received the least attention in the interviews, except in the comments of the Muslims students about the Koran’s role in setting standards and justification for the use of technology. The role of texts in a digital information society has become an important area of conversation. Yet little scholarly work exists in the current literature concerning the place and perception of religious text on the Internet. A notable exception is *Critical Thinking and the Bible in the Age of New Media* (Ess, 2004). This presents a collection of scholarship on how the written word may be transformed as traditional approaches to religious texts, like the Bible, must be revamped when they are transferred onto and read in new media contexts. Thus, the role and perceptions of religious text in the Internet and the embodied faith community needs additional research. Attention should be paid to what role traditional religious texts serve offline, and whether they play the same role as a source of authority in the online religious context. Important questions here include: Are religious texts cited as sources of truth or community policy as frequently and in the same ways in online religious community conversation as in similar religious offline groups? Are texts affirmed or criticized online with the same consistency as they are offline? And do the same texts serve the same roles in both contexts? These and other questions need to be addressed in studies of online religious authority.

**Summary**

This article has argued that researching the question of authority in studies of religion and the Internet requires researchers to approach the concept of authority as multi-layered. There is a need to distinguish the different expressions of “authority” at play within online contexts. Attempts to answer the question, “How does the Internet affect religious authority?” need to identify clearly what specific form of authority is at play. If not, they are in danger of failing to capture the complexity of the relationship between the online and offline religious communities. The call is to identify whether it is hierarchy, structure, ideology, texts, or some combination thereof that is at issue in any discussion of authority online. A multi-layered conception of authority is offered here as a way for researchers—both of religion online and Internet studies in general—to describe more accurately the factor, forces, and relationships involved in questions of authority online.
Through this in-depth discussion of the four layers of authority evident in the discussions of three traditional religious communities, several issues have been raised that may serve as distinctive research foci in future studies of religious authority and the Internet. Under religious hierarchy, more work needs to be done on the emergence of new religious authority roles online. This will mean identifying and defining the character of traditional roles within the specific offline religious communities, and consideration as to whether or not these roles are transported, altered, or eliminated online. Questions need to be asked, such as: Does the online moderator perform a similar role as the pastor or priest offline? Do core members or frequent posters in online groups perform similar roles as a deacon’s or a bishop’s council? This also raises the issue of whether or not those with authority roles online see themselves as linked or accountable in any way to offline religious figures.

As regards religious structures, a need to explore the relationship between offline official structures or channels of authority and those formed in various online forums was noted. This means carefully mapping how channels of authority emerge and function online. What connection do these channels make to traditional structures or organizations? Do religious organizations attempt to monitor or influence online religious groups in any way? How and why? Note needs to be taken of offline religious groups that issue official policy statements related to religious practice online. What concerns do they highlight? How are these policies viewed by religious Internet users?

In relation to religious ideology, the idea was put forward that online interaction might encourage new “glocal” religious identities to form. This means that a redefined understanding of what is seen as the common beliefs or characteristics of the religious community might change as local perspectives are shared and debated in a global forum. Might the sharing of differing views or traditional beliefs mean online conversation may give rise to new interpretations of doctrine or redefinition of a particular faith? Mapping work needs to be done about how online discourse communities accept, reject, or redefine the dominant theologies or dogmas of their particular tradition. What is the relationship between new religious ideologies, interpretation, fundamentalism, and the Internet? Do such ideologies first emerge online, offline, or simultaneously?

More work needs to be done on the role and perceptions of religious text in online religious communities and practices. Do religious texts continue to serve as a premier source of authority? Are they more often affirmed or criticized online? Does the role which official religious texts play online differ across religious traditions? What roles does the Internet play in “canonizing” or validating religious texts?

Finally, the comparison of the responses of members of different religious traditions shows that definitions of what constitutes religious authority may be community- and context-specific. Therefore, there is a need for comparative work across religions on dominant conceptions of authority. Attempts to make overall claims about the changing nature of authority and power in religion in a digital context must begin with a focused exploration of the specific. We need studies that
understand and communicate the historical nuances and functional structures of different religions and religious communities, offline as well as online. These discussions, coupled with a multi-layered approach to authority, should form a baseline for both focused and comparative studies of religious groups’ behaviors and beliefs online. In this way, more robust observations can be made about how the online context truly may transform religious roles, structures, ideologies, and texts in a networked society.

References


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