

P2P theology: the potential of everyday practices, as encribed in virtual internet communities.
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Theology has historically been associated with books. Faith seeking understanding, to use the Anselmian definition, was about reading the words of others. The processes of publication ensured that theology tended to become a historically encribed process in which one read the dated works. It was often the work of elite, a high culture enterprise in which one read the learned, (usually) male.

The postmodern world is meant to usher in a new democratisation of knowledge. This paper will consider this alleged democratisation in specific reference to virtual theology, by examining selected “P2P” theological websites.

An early researcher into the impact of a newly democratized world was French Jesuit, Michel de Certeau was born in 1925. While his early research focused on the history of Christian mysticism, his experiences as a University lecturer amid the student and worker riots in France in 1968 changed his research focus. He began to apply his historiographic methodology on the question of how contemporary individuals responded to cultural change.

“Everyday life provides countless opportunities to practice the social art of admiring our contemporaries’ creativity in adapting mass production and social constraints to individual lifestyles. To pay attention to small details and ephemeral things of beauty will not radically transform the world, but it could make it more hospitable.” (GBR, www research).

With research grants from the French government, Certeau employed many researchers to study the interaction between culture and society. He advanced his methodology of the practices of everyday life, to chronicle how people walked in cities, window shopping, meaning of street names, the use of rail, the way people dress, the practices of graffiti, advertising, purchasing and cooking. He urged that people’s “‘stories’ [can] provide the decorative container of a narrativity for everyday practices.”
Certeau, PEL, 70

Certeau offers a methodology by which the researcher can study how everyday lives are lived in a more democratized culture. To take Certeau seriously, for my PhD research, I had to attend church for 3 months, a participant observation of the prayers and practices of every[sun]day life. In so doing I could chart the every[sun]day theological practices of a community. After my research in preparation for this Colloquium, my conclusion is that I could have saved myself much time and just surfed the internet.

In this paper I wish to advance the argument that the gift of the internet is the gift of virtual theology, the making accessible everyday spiritual practices. We are offered living data among the *laos*, the people of God. A P2P theology/ies are offered in the virtual world, and that such theology/ies are of a rather different formulation than the historically encribed words of the theological elite.

I wish to advance this argument in 3steps.

Firstly, I wish to employ a notion of virtual community,

Secondly, I wish to apply this to online theological communities; specifically open source theological websites, blogs and grid blogging,

Thirdly, I wish to draw out the theological parameters of their discussion, and so argue that these P2P theological communities gift us accessible everyday spiritual practices.

1. Virtual community

After reviewing the previous research on virtual and real-life communities, Jones uses the term "virtual settlement" to refer to the "cyber-space" (virtual environment) within which a virtual community operates.¹ Jones argued for the presence of community in the virtual. He suggested four conditions needed to be met in order for cyberspace interaction to be defined as a "community."

These are:

- (1) a virtual common-public-space where a significant portion of interactive group-CMCs occur;
- (2) a variety of communicators;
- (3) a minimum level of sustained stable membership; and
- (4) a minimum level of interactivity.

Jones four criteria suggest a way of analyzing P2P theological interaction. One could take a specific website, or a specific web practice and then employ Jones criteria to assess its effectiveness as a "virtual settlement." This would not be making a value judgment, but providing a way of talking about the presence, or otherwise, of a P2P theology.

2. Online-theological communities as "virtual settlements"

For my research, I thus selected three potential "settlements." The selection of these "settlements" makes no claim for objectivity, but was simply based on my knowledge of the web. Having selected a type of settlement, I chose a more specific example within each. This was based on Google searching and looking at prominent examples that might be specific enough to ally some data collection and analysis, within the time frames imposed by the conference.

- a) Open Source theological project: The website www.opensourcetheology.net describes itself as "purpose of this site is to assist the development of a transparent, community-driven theology." And even more ambitiously, as "a model for doing community-based theology."² It uses drupal, an open source content management system. It's "Rules of Engagement" argue that it is more than a discussion board, in its seeking of "a usable end-product." It sees itself as responsive to the laos, ordinary believers, as resisting low/high culture dichotomies, as a contextualised dialogue between the local and the virtual, as modular and open-ended.³
- b) Blogging: A weblog is a "frequent, chronological publication of personal thoughts and Web links. A "blog" is often a mixture of what is happening in a person's life and what is happening on the Web, a kind of hybrid diary/guide site."⁴ Blogging is huge. It is a rapidly growing contemporary phenomenon that offers a range of ways of forming community.⁵ In order to apply any sort of confine to the data, I selected blog responses to the 2004, Windsor Report, released October, 2004 in response to the ordination of Bishop Gene Robinson, an openly gay priest. This was a finite, contemporary issue. I used what seemed to be a well-known Anglican website, http://frjakestopsttheworld.blogspot.com/2004/10/windsor-report_18.html and analysed the comments.

¹ Q. Jones, (1997). Virtual-communities, virtual settlements & cyber-archaeology: A theoretical outline. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* [Online], 3(3). Available: <http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol3/issue3/jones.html>.

² www.opensourcetheology.net

³ Rules of engagement, 7, 8, 1, 4, 6.

⁴ Ibid.([cited]).

⁵ Four years ago there were 30,000 weblogs. Today there are nearly a million weblogs, according to www.blogger.com.

- c) Grid-blogging: The public rhetoric states that: "**Grid blogging** aims to investigate the potentials of a distributed media production model spread across blogosphere nodes. It seeks to ignite attention on specific topics at set times through variegated voices. A kind of decentralised flash mobbing for the mind, if you like. Decentralisation is key here. Unlike single collaborative blogging structures that unite discussions under the same URL, Grid blogging is about synchronized guerrilla publishing attacks carried out across a series of online locations. It respects and heightens the individual voice within a media-wise choir. It allows for idea-jamming and mosaics of diverse perspectives to emerge unfettered."

On December 1, the word "brand" was blogged on by 66 bloggers around the world. It was picked up in Brazil and Slovenia. It was used in communities of interest, 8 emerging church blogs, 5 in the coaching. The author of the grid blogging concept concluded that it "drew attention to the multiple facets that make up any issue of substance in these complexity-ridden times."⁶ Then on January 15, the word "ritual" was suggested, and was blogged on at 11 bloggers around the world.

Grid blogging seeded and mutated. Project 365 became a visual grid blog, a photo a day for a year. It became "traditionally" theological, firstly, when it was used as a way of talking around "gospel" and secondly when an Advent grid blog invited contributions on each Sunday of advent, using the words "seek", "stretch", "source", "union" as metaphors.

For the purposes of this study, I chose this [grid : ritual] for analysis, Googled all the references and analysed the posts.

⁶ www.ashleyb.org

Table 1: Three virtual theological “settlements”

	Open source theology:	Blogging:	Grid-blogging:
(1) a virtual common-interactive-public-space	5 - Very good.	5 - Very good	3 - Good All blogs are in common space. However, to read all the responses required the ability to follow links. Some programmers offered help, but technologies were never fully synchronized.
(2) a variety of communicators	5 – Very good.	Dependant on uptake. It relies on the presence comments, the type of people who visit the blog and the type of material posted.	5 – Designed to encourage a distributed, yet collaborative project. The range of projects “seeded” demonstrates the potential for variety.
(3) minimum sustained stable membership	?? I have written to be host, seeking membership numbers.	5 - Very good. From the case study blog; 27 people made comments, 7 more than once, over a period of 20 days (18/10/04 to 6/11/04).	Unsure Membership is voluntary and based on individual uptake. Yet the shared theme does allow a sustained and stable cluster.
(4) minimum interactivity	?? I have written to the host, seeking frequency of membership contributions.	5- Very good. Of the 27 people who made a total of 44 comments, 11 individuals made 19 comments that were a direct interaction with the material from other “comment-ers” (I excluded the responses to the initial blogpost). This will no doubt be dictated by the “tone” of the blog and the participants.	3- Good. While, there is no need to engage with other grid-blogs, there is shared interactivity with a common theme.

Note: ??’s = I am still seeking information.

Summary

My data set is very selective. The presence of a virtual community or otherwise is also dependant factors such as participation or the skills of the blogger (Just like in real-time communities).

Nevertheless, using Jones notion of "virtual settlement," each of these examples suggest the presence of P2P, or virtual theological communities.

Equally, using Jones four criteria show that different forms of community have different strengths and weaknesses. Consider for example the contrast between blogging and grid blogging. A blog allows the “community” leader to frame the discussion, while a gridblog allows multiple initial perspectives on a single issue. This suggests a greater range of perspectives. It seems to work against the "headlining" or "RSS feeding" that is part of the formation of blog communities. The multiplicity of blogs means the use of technologies such as RSS feeds, which provide headlines or the first 25 words. This begins to feel like a newspaper boy shouting “Read all about it.” Grid blogging encourages, at the minimum, multiple angles on the same headline. Grid blogging also encourages planning. A date and a theme are

set for the grid blog and thus one has a number of days or even weeks to reflect upon what they might post.

3. Theological parameters

The broad rules of the discipline that is theology notes the presence of formative factors or sources. Good theology, we are informed, is subject to revelation, faithful to Scripture, continuous with Christian tradition, consistent with experience and reason, and appropriate to culture.

These disciplinary constraints can be applied to P2P theology. (Due to the pressures of time, and the huge range of data present in open source theology, I am only going to consider the case studies in relation to blogging and gridblogging).

So, in the virtual settlement that is Father Jakes blog, in specific reference to the Windsor Report, we see the use of the formative factors.

the tradition – discussion of the factuality of the history of the Anglican church,⁷
revelation – in the assertion that, given the seeking of the Spirit in the election of Bishop Gene Robinson, the decision is a revelation of God's will and purposes,⁸
culture – homosexuality as a struggle against ancient cultural prejudices and the need to face contemporary cultural shifts,⁹
experience – a call to leave Bishop Gene Robinson in place “for observation” as a way of validating change,¹⁰ and the place of personal perceptions toward homosexual practices,¹¹
scripture – references to selected passages,¹² and the authority of Scripture,¹³
reason – in the application of logical thought processes,¹⁴

What is of more interest is the re-curring presence of themes of mission and ecclesiology in relation to the church; “I found myself strangely agreeing with comments such as “It is the one lost and hurting outside our walls that is our primary concern; not the 99 preoccupied with how we “do church.”¹⁵ There is considerable P2P interaction in regard to feeding the hungry, welcoming the excluded and how dialogue can work.

My analysis is that formative factors are an ill-fitting template, and a better model for what is happening in this “virtual settlement” is a discussion of everyday practices. Specifically, the priority among this virtual settlement is the Windsor report in relation to practices of hospitality among the poor, the sexually marginalised and those with different theological beliefs. This P2P theology is, of course, shaped by the specific make-up of this self-selecting virtual community. Nevertheless, it demonstrates that virtual communities provide a window onto theology as everyday practices.

This becomes even clearer when one analyses the discourse of those who grid blog in relation to ritual. The overwhelming theme is one of a hermeneutic of experience. Ritual is repeatedly discussed in

⁷ Radicalfeministpoet, 10.18.04 – 11:09 am

⁸ WonderSheep, 10.19.04 – 12:00 pm

⁹ Jake, citing Bishop John Shelby Spong, 10.19.04 – 12:51 pm.

¹⁰ NancyP, 10.19.04 – 1:54 pm

¹¹ Jake, 10.25.04 – 3:42 am

¹² JHD, 10.19.04 – 3:15 pm.

¹³ Stephen Secaur, 10.19.04 – 3:32 pm

¹⁴ Jake, 10.20.04 – 11:39 am, javery, 10.20.04 – 1:55 pm

¹⁵ JHD, 10.19.04 – 3:15 pm.

relation to everyday life; leaving the house, working, connecting as human into a digital world, tourism, stress, dating, the interaction of communities with musical concerts and prayer.

We hear the practices of an engagement with a Catholic saint;

“What I’ve now concluded, God or not, is that I did in fact receive ... gifts: The ability to open my mind enough to accept that rituals, like prayer, are okay. Regardless of belief. It’s the act, the moments of focus and imagination that matter.”¹⁶

We hear a cry for meaning; “Rituals keep you sane in an otherwise insane world.”¹⁷ We hear discussion of ritual in relation to contemporary community; “Rituals are far more than as set of fictions. They seek to strengthen the bonds between people.”¹⁸ Yet everyday people are describing the practices that are in fact their search for meaning. “Perhaps in this data rich age I’m just syncing myself to the network The rituals of the digital age are poorly documented ... The grid::blog peels back a window into these patterns and rituals.”¹⁹

Hence my argument. That virtual settlements are in fact P2P theological communities that gift us accessible everyday spiritual practices. They are a window onto individual practices, an articulation of individual seeking understanding.

In this paper I have introduced the concept of everyday practices. I have applied Jones notion of virtual settlements to a limited data set in the form of a number of internet manifestations.

I have argued that these are indeed P2P, or virtual, theological communities, albeit each with different strengths and weaknesses. I have then suggested that reading the content of such discussion reveals a faith seeking understanding, not in historical theological formulations, but in the discussion of everyday spiritual practices. The internet thus offers an exciting new research tool. It is serving as a virtual theological community and is offering us a window onto everyday practices.

¹⁶ Grid ritual – life of trillion

¹⁷ Agile business navigator

¹⁸ Junk for code

¹⁹ Abstract dynamics.