Introduction: Religion and Internet

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In her well-known *Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway writes about a cybernetic organism that she describes in these terms: “We are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs” (Haraway 1991:150). The cyborg is, at one and the same time, a social fact and a world-changing fiction that carries prophetic and utopian elements. In a sense, the kind of hybridism that Haraway describes in the cyborg seems, from a present-day perspective, more factual than ever before, even though the more radical and utopian aspects of Haraway’s essay still linger in the future. The blurred boundaries between humans and machines characterise the contemporary digitalised world. Digital media have not only become further integrated and visible in culture at large; they also play a central part of everyday life (Ammerman 2014). In what sometimes is referred to as the 24-hour society (Moore-Ede 1993), various digital communication media can no longer be considered a separate part of society, or limited to the desktop computer. Nowadays, we are citizens of a global digital world, mediatised, communicative and participating in the digital era while waiting for a bus, at work, watching TV, meeting friends, having sex, praying in church, etc. The boundaries between different content are blurred as well; we could answer job-related emails while ordering a new carpet, practise religion online, write a scientific chapter, update our Facebook profile, and make plans for the weekend. To paraphrase Haraway, today’s cybernetic organism is digitalised.

The distinction between online and offline religion is likewise changing shape, as the means we use to stay connected and part of the network are changing in a way that brings them closer to our body and enables round-the-clock Internet access – for the online portion of the world’s population at least. This relatively new situation is captured by Heidi Campbell’s use of the term digital religion that points to “the technological and cultural space that is evoked when we talk about how online and offline religious spheres have become blended or integrated” (Campbell 2013: 1–2). While parts of humanity

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become increasingly embroiled in a web of communication and have to face new difficulties emerging from the negative effects of a network society, such as stress and other health issues, and unwanted surveillance, other parts of humanity are rarely or never connected. New forms of inequality are therefore becoming apparent as a part, and even an effect, of the emerging digital landscape. Following these developments, we can clearly also analyse and understand the new media landscape in the light of both utopian and dystopian scenarios.

For example, new forms of inequality can relate to supervision, power and control. Earlier forms of surveillance have been replaced by a disembedded, more fluid monitoring for which technology is crucially important. This type of monitoring relies on technical features that make an individual visible by means of interactions with various media and technological innovations (Lyon 2003: 18–22). But communication technologies also clearly provide an opportunity to question old authorities and prevailing power structures, and by extension they can be used to establish a more democratic and equal growth.

In a constant flow of new products – advanced cell-phones, tablets and other mobile and flexible gadgets, along with new software, programs and platforms – the digital culture and the human body have merged together in a way that means we can speak, on the one hand, of an intimatisation and embodiment of digital culture and digital religion, and on the other of the digitalisation of intimate spheres of society and everyday life. At the same time, the accessibility of the global world culture(s) has affected modern understandings of the concepts of time and place. Past and future melt together in the present, here and now, in what may look like a postmodern dream fulfilled (Lyon 2000). Following Haraway further, the dissolving boundaries of the human body as a cyborg can be seen as “a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end. The cyborg incarnation is outside salvation history.” (Haraway 1991: 150). At the same time, the new media and the digital culture are witnessing rising levels of human activity and participation, in what Henry Jenkins has called a participatory culture: we are “participants that interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands” (Jenkins 2008: 3) – in the age of media convergence, or “the flow of content across multiple media platforms” (Jenkins 2008: 2). Human activity in the digital culture reproduces the digital culture itself in a constant and increasingly intense dialectical process. Some argue that this situation also generates new forms of religion and the sacred (Brasher 2001), as well as new ways to express and participate in religion. Others claim instead that the new technological developments in the field of communication should be seen