CHAPTER NINE

THE NEW FACE OF GLOBAL EVANGELISM: VIRTUALIZING SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE*

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Introduction

International borders [can] no longer . . . prevent the spread of Christian literature and educational material. Nor can international borders interfere with fellowship and communication between Christians of different nations. This new technology also allows Christians everywhere to communicate with each other, learn from each other, and thus strengthen believers everywhere . . . Because of this new technology, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the enemies of the Christian gospel to stop or limit the spread of the Christian message (Rickmar, 1997).

One of the factors in Christianity’s continuous and massive growth is its relentless adoption of every mechanism possible to spread the gospel of salvation—missions, mass crusades, pop gospel, and even televangelism (Woodhead, 2004). Today, evangelism has evolved into a yet another form by tapping into the global capabilities of the Internet. Considering Protestantism’s evangelistic vigilance, a Christian of the Protestant denomination2 is most probably behind the other computer (Zaleski, 1997).

Without physically sending missionaries across the globe, the Internet is ushering in unprecedented opportunities for the spread of Christianity. Heavily exploiting the compression of time and space, Christianity sees the Internet as the new battleground where a new breed of

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2 Throughout this paper, “Christianity” refers to Protestantism, without privileging any denomination in particular. The websites considered in this paper profess to be non-denominational.
missionaries may establish links with another individual from a different time zone, involve him in a dialogue, and invite him to recognize Jesus as personal Lord. Though different in form, online evangelism is hinged upon the same objectives of presenting the evangelical gospel to a wider audience and winning people over to the greater community of Christian believers.

Given the Internet as its new territory, how does Christianity take on a modern form of evangelism? Conventionally, evangelism involves concrete face-to-face interaction between the missionary and the unbeliever, which makes persuasion and community-formation more feasible. However, online evangelism, though efficient in its global coverage, seems to lack the important aspects of in-person interaction. With this in mind, how does the Internet allow for the creation of a community of believers? As its influence widens, how is it bound to shape contemporary Christianity?

Research Aims

This paper intends to contribute to the discussion on the globalization of religion by looking at forms and processes of what I consider the new face of global Protestant evangelism: the virtualization of spiritual experience. Contextualized in this volume on religion and technology in Asia, this chapter provides three interrelated propositions. First, the main argument is that the Internet is facilitating the replication of spiritual experience that may seem to be the rise of Christianity on cyberspace that complements Christianity on the ground. Simply put, traditional ministry such as prayer meetings, Bible studies, and discipleship programmes are being creatively carried out on the Internet. The wide critique that the Internet promotes either an illusion of community or social detachment and thus fails to build meaningful relationships among its users is hereby challenged. This needs further clarification.

Indeed because the Internet is a decidedly global technology detached from any form of place-based locality, observers can immediately assert that like any other media, it creates an illusion of community. Appadurai (2004: 101) counters this in arguing that the “world we live in now seems rhizomic, even schizophrenic, calling for theories of rootlessness, alienation, and psychological distance between individuals and groups on the one hand, and fantasies (or nightmares) of electronic propinquity on the other”. While Appadurai’s point is valid, one must also take into consideration how social actors on supposedly chaotic and disen-