CHAPTER TEN

RELIGIOUS ECOLOGY ON THE INTERNET:
A CASE STUDY OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM

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Introduction

The introduction of the Internet has changed the face of religion worldwide (Dawson & Cowan, 2004). Religion is redefined in the online environment, which emerges as a new space for religious learning and practices. This study examines the practice of religion as an ecology on the Internet, particularly how the Internet serves as a new environment to convey religious information and whether religious communities can be formed and sustained in cyberspace. To answer these questions, the online practice of Tibetan Buddhism was examined as a case study.

Ernst Haeckel, a German zoologist in the late 19th century referred to “ecology” as the interactions among the elements of our natural environment and how such interactions lead to a balanced environment (Postman, 2000). Cultural critic Postman formally introduced the term “media ecology” in 1968. Media ecology is the “study of media as environments” (Postman, 1970) and it examines the ways in which “the interaction between media and human beings give a culture its character” and “help a culture to maintain symbolic balance” (Postman, 2000: 11). This incorporates the study of “symbols, symbol systems, and symbolic form with the study of media and technology” (Strate, 2003: 344).

Within the purview of media ecology is Nardi and O’Day’s research on information ecologies (Lytle, 2005). Nardi and O’Day (1999: 50–51) defined information ecology as “a system of people, practices, values and technologies in particular local environment” sustained by the active participation of the people. Expanding upon Nardi and O’Day’s notion of information ecology, Lytle (2005) derived an ecological framework

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for religious systems. The five components identified by Lytle as part of a religious ecology are: collection, creed, code, cultus and the community that results from these components. In Lytle’s analysis of six Christian websites, she observed that these sites incorporate audio, video, threaded discussions, live chats, animation and slides to create an online religious ecology to “welcome seekers, reaching out to former members, informing initiates, and extending resources for established members” (Lytle, 2005: 225).

**Methodology**

A triangulation research approach was used for the study. Tibetan Buddhist websites were selected for content analysis, and in-depth interviews and participant observations were conducted in India, Nepal and Singapore. The sample of in-depth interviews comprised 44 adherents and 8 teachers of Tibetan Buddhism. In-depth interviews were carried out with qualified Tibetan Buddhist teachers (the informants), and adherents of Tibetan Buddhism (the respondents). This research included a face-to-face interview sample that comprised both informants and respondents from Australia, China, France, Germany, Holland, Hong Kong, India, Nepal, New Zealand, Singapore, the United States, and Tibet; and an online interview sample that comprised respondents from Argentina, New Zealand, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Singapore, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Content analysis of websites and participant observation was conducted to complement the findings and interpretations on the adoption of the Internet for religious purposes. Content analysis was conducted on eight selected English websites of Tibetan Buddhism that were mentioned by the interviewees, especially websites that were related to the teachers who were interviewed. Participant observation covered three main methods of observation, participation, and field-note writing (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). For this research, the researcher took on the role of a complete participant.

**Internet as a Sacramental Space**

Heidi Campbell (2005a: 110) has described the Internet as a sacramental space, which can be used “as a spiritual tool, religious identity, a space