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## **Book Review: Exploring Religious Community Online: We are One in the Network**

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### BOOK REVIEWS

Heidi Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We are One in the Network*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2005. xx + 213 pp. ISBN 0820471054, \$29.95 (pbk)  
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In the introduction of her book, Heidi Campbell presents the reader with the heading ‘Community Online?’ (p. xiv). This very broad question engages ongoing debates in media and religion about whether relationships on the internet can be ‘real’ relationships. Before the end of the introduction, Campbell spells out her foundational assumption that these communities are, in fact, ‘real’. From this position she launches her study, not to determine the reality of online community, but to determine, rather, how these communities function. She writes, ‘The underlying question [of this study] has not been “Can an online group be a community?”, but “What type of community does an online group represent?”’ (p. xix).

In her efforts to answer this question, she makes a broader argument about the nature of community. She argues that community must be conceptualized as a network rather than grounded in or bounded to a particular place. She contends that the concept of community as network allows scholars to move beyond fixed categories of community and to evaluate and re-define community as contingent upon the ‘narrow, specialized relationships’ of people ‘floating in sparse, loosely bound, frequently changing networks’ (p. 37).

Campbell’s central argument is that the internet facilitates new forms of social interaction, which must be considered new forms of community (with requisite qualifications). In addition, these new forms of interaction influence interaction more broadly – offline as well as online. In short, the internet is a social space, not simply a medium for communication. It is a space for human interaction as well as for spiritual fulfillment through religious community. Furthermore, it is a space that can be integrated into other important spaces in our lives, creating a reciprocal flow of determination that shapes both online and offline social spaces.

Campbell focuses on online Christian communities. She extends her arguments beyond Christianity and online community, but these communities represent her starting point. Her study involves three online Christian communities with different community purposes and theological orientations. She engaged with these groups over a four-year period, but the crux of her data collection involved up to ten weeks of participant observation with each group, followed by a pre-tested and standardized questionnaire for group members and, finally, in-depth interviews with selected group members (p. 78).

After establishing her central question in the introduction, Campbell moves into a brief history of the internet with a focus on its social nature. She situates the internet within the myth and metaphor of 'cyberspace' and within dueling proclamations of technological hope and fear. From here, Campbell builds her foundation of religious, online community by combining a brief intellectual and theological history of community with her thoughts about the internet. She offers a more in-depth view of Christian conceptions of community, drawing heavily on the religious community models of Avery Dulles (p. 32). Campbell then posits the internet as a spiritual network and turns her attention fully to online Christian communities.

Much of the book is dedicated to an analysis of these communities she has spent so much time studying. Campbell highlights the narratives and identities created by each community, discusses the role of email as the main communicative practice facilitating community in these groups, offers an analysis of the relationship between online and offline communities and extends this discussion to specific ramifications for the Christian church – online and off. In much of her analysis, Campbell concerns herself with the question of whether the online Christian community is a 'supplement, substitute, or something else' (p. 161) to the offline Christian church.

To a great extent, Campbell's key findings can be summarized as follows: 1) community functions as network; 2) online religious communities are networks based on stories; 3) online, religious communities mainly supplement offline religious communities; and 4) the steady rise of online, religious communities poses challenges and opportunities for communities – religious and non-religious, online and off.

Campbell is clear in her arguments, which she supports with solid interview excerpts and analysis. She engages in current debates surrounding online 'authenticity', then effectively moves beyond them. Her work rightly forces readers to think about the nature of religion and community beyond valuations of 'authentic' and 'inauthentic'. The new conceptions of community that Campbell posits would be worth little without the substantial grounding she establishes for her ideas. She forces readers to evaluate questions of community in relation to what people 'in the pews', as it were, have to say about their own practices. Hers is not a work that encourages theoretical abstraction because it offers such rich description and analysis of religious community online.

Early in the book, Campbell positions herself as a 'critical friend' (p. 16) of online community, but she seems to become a champion, albeit a hesitant one, for self-selection and agency, even though she sees these as challenges to community. Nonetheless, the thrust of her work focuses on the ability of people to choose from a variety of networks. She pays little attention to the structure of networks generally or to conditions in late modernity (other than the internet) that create shifts in community (as well as conceptions about it) and that condition self-selection. This sort of consideration was perhaps beyond the scope of her analysis, but it could have spurred numerous critical inquiries about community in late modern life that would extend beyond a functional account of different 'types' of community, online or off.

Campbell's insights, combined with her methodological rigor and depth of analysis, offer much to scholars of media, religion and society. She contributes to the ongoing debates surrounding online communication and offers ways to move through these debates into the ways in which people invest in various forms of community – online and off, in church and out.

Alexander John Watson, *Marginal Man: The Dark Vision of Harold Innis*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. xi + 525 pp. ISBN 0802039162, \$65.00 (hbk). DOI: 10.1177/1461444806069657

Reviewed by MARK BREWIN  
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Before he turned to communication theory late in his career, Harold Innis achieved a degree of academic fame for his histories of Canadian staple industries. These works were distinctive for their remarkable detail, thorough research and extended considerations of material context. In his recent biography of Innis, *Marginal Man: The Dark Vision of Harold Innis*, Alexander John Watson seems to have consciously determined not only to provide us with the fullest treatment of Innis's intellectual life to date, but to reproduce Innis's method as well. Through extensive use of archival material and personal interviews, Watson mirrors his subject's insistence on the need for what both men call 'dirt' research: the massive accumulation of primary sources to construct a narrative history. So, for example, just as Innis felt it was important to detail the physiology of the beaver prior to outlining the history of the