

The Impact of Internet on New Religious Movements' Discourse¹

Sebastian Năstuță*

Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Romanian Academy, Iași Branch

Abstract: *The unprecedented development of the Internet in contemporary world and its increasing influence in people's life produce, inevitably, an impact on religious practice. This paper is interested to analyze the manners Internet and web-based religious communication affects New Religious Movements' public discourses and the manner these groups' construct their own religious messages to attract more adherents, via Internet. We intend to demonstrate that communication through Internet positively influences the way NRMs construct their own religious messages to attract new adherents, that NRMs' public discourse is influenced by their self-positioning as cultural and religious alternatives, and also by extensive Internet usage in disseminating and constructing their religious discourse. As Internet impacts most religious groups' communication we want to underline those elements specific to NRMs' communication. To depict the specificity of Internet's impact on NRMs' discourse we'll first underline some general transformations within religious life and practice induced by long-term social changes, like modernization or globalization. These generate deep cultural transformation on people's mentality, and religion become, in Western societies, rather a cultural product (Beckford), a projects of the autonomous self (Hoover) dominated by a turn to subjective-life (Woodhead). Mediatization of religion (Hjarvard) generates interesting phenomenons, like "banal religion" (Hjarvard), "hyper-religion" (Possamai) or "cultural religion" (Albanese), while the Internet creates many possibilities of action on religious field for any individual. From challenging traditional religious authorities to creation of a new churchless religion, the Internet allows, especially to New Religious Movements, to attract more followers using the Internet. After these demarcations we'll underline the specific effects of Internet on NRMs' discourse. As these groups are much interested in attracting new followers and being more persuasive to outsiders, their public discourses become less traditional, less theological and more flexible, more marketized and follower-oriented.*

Keywords: Internet and religion; religious practice; new religious movements; religious discourse.

Cuvinte-cheie: Internet și religie; practică religioasă; noile mișcări religioase; discurs religios.

Introduction

According to Internet World Stats, at 30 June 2012, 34.3% of World's population had Internet access. This situation is better in North America (78.6%), Australia/Oceania (67.6%) and Europe (63.2%). In the last 12 years, the growth rate of internet

usage was 566.4% globally (Internet World Stats, 2012). Statistics seem even more spectacular if we consider Internet users' number was doubled in the last five years. Also, Facebook has now more users than the entire Internet had back in 2004, the year the social network was founded (Royal Pingdom Blog, 2012). These data

* Romanian Academy, Iași Branch. E-mail: nastuta.sebastian@gmail.com.

indicate an increasing role and impact of Internet and new media technologies on people's lives, especially in the developed countries.

As we live in a cybersociety where the Internet has become a resource for everyone and for everything, it is also a source of sermons and shapes including the way pastors and parishioners practice their religion. Because "the medium is the message", as Marshall McLuhan observed, *Internet sermons necessarily reflect and convey something of their Internet source* (van der Laan, 2009, 272). Our paper starts from this assumption: the online religious communication and religious practice on virtual environment is inevitably affected by Internet's main characteristics.

The vast majority of religious groups, with little exception, are now online. Based on members' socio-demographic profile, on group's manner to approach the society and other religious competitors, a group's online communication will be more or less complex, more or less standardized and uni- or bidirectional. As we'll indicate next, the evolutions of religious life and religious practice on Internet age are extremely diverse, complex and it is almost impossible to be extensively covered in only one article. *That's why we'll focus our attention only on how Internet impacts on the New Religious Movements' (NRMs) discourse.*

We intend to demonstrate that communication through Internet *influences the way NRMs² construct their own religious messages to attract new adherents*, that *NRMs' public discourse is influenced by their self-positioning as cultural and religious alternatives*, and also by extensive *Internet usage in disseminating and constructing their religious discourse.*

There are, of course, many similarities between effects of Internet on religious discourses of churches, sects and NRMs³, and the majority of literature dedicated to Internet and religion does not separate these institutions' communication or online

religious life. From our point of view, there are differences, and these are essential in analyzing their online discourse.

A church is mainly interested in keeping its own members, in supplying them with information and offering them an online community within church. A church has a clear group of adherents and, using the Internet facilities, it could intend mainly to attract them to be better practicers and more religiously involved. On the other hand, a sect or a NRM intends to attract new adepts and needs to persuade them by providing a positive and attractive image to people that have little information about it.

While most sects are active in spreading their critical message and in searching actively their possible adepts by attacking the traditional religious groups, a NRM propose mainly an alternative religious life-style. A NRM is not in a sharp and open conflict with mainstream churches and does not criticize them as the sects do. Due to this difference, we consider that sects' discourse is more appropriate to be spread through direct spoken communication⁴, while the NRMs' discourse could be of greater interest for those interested more in searching individually religious information or those looking for an alternative improved religious life-style or a new religious community. Starting from these differences, we intend to focus on how Internet transforms NRMs' public discourse. Simply said, we want to indicate how, in the case of NRMs, due to their specific type of discourse (non-conflictual, inclusiveness, openness to attracting new people, etc.) the Internet become an important platform for promoting their image and attracting many possible converts to a NRM⁵.

To depict the specificity of Internet's impact on NRMs' discourse, we'll first underline some general transformations within religious life and practice induced by long-term social changes, like modernization or globalization. Secondly, we'll

depict some *consequences* of religious mediatization as a widely-spread contemporary social phenomenon. Thirdly, we'll focus our attention on the *influences induced by the Internet on individual's religious practice* and on *the way religious groups communicate in the virtual world*⁶. Only after these demarcations, we will underline the specific effects of Internet on NRM's discourse which is our paper's title and main objective.

Religion in Internet age

In the last decades, sociologists and other social scholars talk more and more about effects of globalization, individualization, atomization, on society, family and religion, etc. These are undeniable trends that affect larger layers of population in most developed countries. As people are now different compared with previous generations and behave differently, their manner of approaching the sacred realm or the divinity is totally changed. Spirituality replaces religion, online religion replaces church-going, and the traditional authority is replaced by other instances.

Such profound transformations were presented by Stewart Hoover as a tendency to "personal autonomy" wherein religion is seen increasingly as a *project of the autonomous and reflexive self*. Religion is moving "away from situations in which religious institutions and histories were definitive to situations in which individual questing and practice have become more definitive" (Hoover, 2003, 12; *apud* Asamoah-Gyadu, 2008, 58).

Today, religion become a public, commodified, therapeutic, and personalized set of practices much more than it has been in the past. At the same time, the media are collectively coming to constitute a realm where important projects of "the self" take place – projects that include spiritual, trans-

endent, and deeply meaningful "work". This means that, rather than being autonomous, actors involved in institutionalized projects in relation to each other, religion and media are increasingly converging on a common turf of everyday world of lived experience (Hoover, 2002, 1-2) on a mediatized and personalized religion.

A similar perspective on religion is assumed by James Beckford who considers it might be better to conceptualize religion in the contemporary Western world as "a cultural resource... than as a social institution" (Beckford, 1992, 23; Beckford, 1989, 171; *apud* Dawson and Hennebry, 2004, 165).

In Linda Woodhead's view such processes might be included in what she calls "the second modernity of Christianity", which started in the 1960s. A defining cultural characteristic of this modernity is the turn to subjective-life, which involves a flight from deference to established external religious or secular authority and an embrace of the authority of one's own deepest feelings, intuitions, desires, and experiences (Woodhead, 2004, 89).

Even if we quote Stewart Hoover who sees religion as a project of the autonomous, reflexive self, James Beckford who considers religion rather as a cultural resource or Linda Woodhead, who states that religion is dominated by a turn to subjective-life they discuss about a transformation process of religions and a transition from institutional to non-institutional forms of religious manifestations, from objective, external or formal religious structures to subjective and privatised religious thoughts and feelings.

The media and the Internet are simple pieces within this puzzle of cultural and social transformations. As more people, mainly from developed countries, become heavy media consumers and heavy Internet users, media and Internet become strong facilitators of these deep transformations of social and religious life.

Mediatization of religion

As mass-media dominates our lives and people are media-addicted many aspects of people's social life, including religion, are media-filtred. Television, radio, newspapers, reviews or Internet contributes to what Stig Hjarvard calls "religious mediatization".

The media become an important, if not the primary source of information about religious issues. *Mass media are both producers and distributors of religious experiences*, while interactive media (Internet) provide a borderless platform for the expression and circulation of individual beliefs. The media takes over the power to define and frame what religion is, and what parts of religion are considered significant in society. As a cultural and social environment the media have taken over many of the cultural and social functions of the institutionalised religions, and provide spiritual guidance, moral orientation, ritual passages and a sense of community and belonging (Hjarvard, 2008b, 14-16 *apud* Lövheim and Lynch 2011, 13).

That is primarily a development that has accelerated particularly during the last decades of the twentieth century in modern, highly industrialised and mainly Western societies (Hjarvard 2008a; *apud* Lövheim and Lynch 2011; Hjarvard, 2011, 119).

Being meta-process shaping modern societies, the mediatization affects religion as institution, as well as a social and cultural activity. Mediatization does not only imply a change in the mediation of religion in society, it also affects the "core elements" of religion, as the public religious discourse. Even though the media cannot be said to have certain religious intentions, their increasing dependence on consumer demands makes them produce religious information and experiences that are in accordance with the most popular media genres. Thus, they produce a mix of reli-

gious representations that Hjarvard refers to as *banal religion*⁷ (2008b, 14-16; *apud* Lövheim and Lynch, 2011, 13).

A similar point of view belongs to Adam Possamai who talks about transformation of religion into *hyper-religion* which is "a simulacrum of religion created out of popular culture which provides inspiration for believers/consumers on a metaphorical level" rather than to a religious level. That is "hyper-real" as it is consumed online in private or in virtual communities (Possamai, 2009; *apud* Hjelm, 2012, 477). Albanese talks also about the emergence of *cultural religion* or religious practice focused on media of popular culture such as television, film, and popular music (1996 *apud* Stout, 2006b, 175).

These changes and assimilations of religions into popular culture are an increasing trend and the *Internet is one of its most important facilitators* as it offers full-time access to this type of cultural, banal or hyper-religious information whose regular usage affects users' manner of relating to traditional religious institutions and transforms their way of approaching the religious life.

Effects of Internet on religious life and practice

Although the access to television or mobile telephony might be widely spread, the Internet definitively changed people's life, as it is the only access gate to the entire world and the only communication channel with, hypothetically, the whole world of Internet users. More and more people, from children to older people, spend hours on Internet to communicate with others, for gaming, information search, newspaper reading, and also for religious purposes. Is not at all exaggerated to say that Internet deeply changed our lives, and, for an increasing number of

people, it *changes their religious and spiritual life if we consider that more and more people are searching for religious information and practice their religion in the virtual environment.*

Via Internet, people can enter into conversations with people from the most diverse cultures and subcultures, encountering ideas to which they would never be exposed in the daily routines of their lives. Virtual associations could replace the loss of traditional neighborhoods and small personal work environments, counter the deleterious effects of increasing social and geographic mobility, the impersonal nature of large bureaucratic organizations, and facilitates the formation of entirely new kinds of communities, free of limiting factors as ethnic stereotyping, class distinctions, gender discrimination, and differences in time, as well as space (Dawson, 2004, 76-77). Through virtual and online religious communities⁸ the Internet enables adherents of different religions around the world to sustain connections to distant homeland communities and traditions (Helland, 2007; *apud* Chilwa, 2012, 734) or allows people and organisations to communicate information, find resources and stay connected with their own communities (Hutchings, 2010, 11).

A brief literature review of internet and religion studies allowed us to identify at least *nine trends* generated by the influence of Internet on individuals' religious practice, on religious communities' life, and on the way religious groups communicate in the virtual world.

The ubiquitous presence of the internet in everyday life impacts multiple spheres of public life including new forms of the practice of religion. When public religion meets the information society, Campbell and Golan consider the result is an ensuing *migration of religious expressions and identity online* (2011, 720).

The interconnection between the online and off-line life and activities, the pene-

tration of daily routines by the Internet has a direct effect on how people spend the working or leisure time. For an increasing number of people, the Internet changes the *manner they interact with God, Allah or any other supernatural instances.*

Increasing numbers of people are seeing the Internet as sacred space and Internet technology as possessing a spiritual quality. As sacramental space, the internet can be used to help *form religious identity*, as a *space for personal spiritual pursuits*, as a *social spiritual support sphere* and as a *spiritual tool* (Campbell, 2005, 129).

The Internet became also a *platform that assembles religious identities* in ways that are less structured than the avenues offered by official institutions. Lövhelm and Linderman discussed about young practitioners of Witchcraft that are allowed to *develop their Wiccan identity by drawing on multiple online sources* beyond the oversight of a single coven (2005 *apud* Campbell, 2012, 8). A similar process of developing someone's own religious identity could be imagined about any Internet user, from any religious tradition.

When compared with the familiar media used to distribute religious views, such as books, videos, tapes, radio, and television, Internet sites are easily accessible and in many respects more economical to produce and operate. Practically, the Internet opens the surprising *new opportunities even to start your own religion*. Also, anyone can sample a *wide array of alternative religious views* and, if they so choose, they can hide exposure or consumption of such views from the prying eyes of others (Dawson and Hennebry, 2004, 152) by using a virtual identity.

Due to diversity of online religious practice, Campbell highlights a potential *struggle between traditional and new sources of authority* on the religious communities and religious websites. Webmasters, moderators and designers may constitute new classes of religious

leaders or emerge as online religious interpreters simply due to their prominence in the virtual world. This raises questions about the nature of religious authority on the Internet (Campbell, 2012, 9). Hjarvard also considers the increased importance of the media as a prime mediator of religion in society will challenge the authority, position and function of traditional religious institutions (2008b, 14-16 *apud* Lövheim and Lynch, 2011, 13).

Dawson and Hennebry believe Internet opens the possibility to create a truly *churchless religions* (2004, 166).

As the Internet is largely unregulated in terms of content, used by all kinds of people and communities in their pursuit of interactivity, identity and association, the websites have become an extended *space for interfaith net wars* (Thomas, 2008, 140), especially because when posting their views online, people are likely to be confronted with alternative opinions posed by people from lands and traditions quite alien to their own (Dawson and Cowan, 2004, 10).

Due to complex offers of online religious tools (online prayer chains, devotional pages, electronic confessionals, e-adoration), *the line between the provision of religious information and the practice of religion* (Dawson and Cowan, 2004, 7) is not clearly delineated now.

The interactive character of web activities, such as blogging, gaming, podcasting, and instant-messaging transforms the acts of *consumption* into an act of *production* (Hoover, 2006, 48) of a specific discourse (religious, etc.) opening the possibility to *any individual to create religious messages or to participate to religious discourses creation*.

Most of the world's religions are currently practised on the Internet, thus making religion and spirituality in the context of computer-mediated communication more flexible for worshipping God

and reaching more people (Garton and Wellman, 1995 *apud* Chiluwa, 2012, 734).

Such a list, which is not final, indicates deep and complex transformation of the manners people manifest their religiosity and practice their religious belief, in the Internet environment. By connecting any person to a global virtual community, the Internet opens possibilities of religious manifestation hardly to be imagined before.

The impact of Internet on NRM's religious discourse

In their efforts to attract new followers, and to satisfy the information or community needs of own followers, most religious groups embrace the new media technologies.

Because the Web, like any "environment", acts back upon its content (Dawson and Hennebry, 2004, 166), it is influencing the way *religious messages are delivered or received*. Transformations of religious practices induced by Internet and the manners Internet is used by different religious groups have, inevitably, a direct consequence on the public religious discourse of any religious group.

For established religious groups, the official discourse is imposed and controlled by group's doctrines or official theology. Via Internet, this can be received as it is delivered, and debated or analysed only in online discussions. The offline or online community has less influence on groups' public discourse, as this is controlled by church's representatives which are, in most cases, theologians endowed with official religious authority and formal functions.

In the case of NRMs' religious discourse⁹, the situation is different. As these groups are much interested in attracting new followers and being more persuasive to outsiders, their *public discourses are less traditional, less theological and*

more flexible, more marketized and follower-oriented.

Eliberated by any rigid connections to a religious tradition, a NRM is free to adapt its own image to demands of those religious consumers that are more attracted by subjective and private religious or spiritual manifestations. For example, *Boston Christian Church* (BCC) webpage propose an aspirational but also community and family oriented image that might be very attractive for a person living in a metropolis and craving for a small-town or village community, or to those who dislike traditional religious practices.

By using images of people with different ethnic background and, apparently, of different social status, BCC promotes a very inclusive and inviting image. Looking on their webpage we can observe sections dedicated to different targeted populations, like single moms, singles, preteen, children, poor and needy, Spanish, women, campus. *Such an image is more oriented to*

attract new people than underlying the religious ideas of this group.

Soka Gakai (SG) and *Christian Science* (CS) use a similar visual rethoric strategy, as both promote an image of a global, multi-ethnic and multigenerational community interested by topics like human rights, interfaith dialogue, or interracial relations. The *Family International* (FI) promotes a similar image focused on children and family support. *There is a religious legitimation for every proposed action, but the religious aspects seem to be less important than these pro-social desirable activities.*

This type of all-inclusive images transmit a neutral message from a religious and cultural point of view as persons with different religious background might be easily attracted by a public image without prominent Christian or Buddhist religious symbols, as those promoted by BCC, SG, CS or FI, even if these NRMs clearly assume a Christian or Buddhist religious identity.



Figure 1: Screenshot of *Christian Science* webpage (www.christianscience.com - 15.12.2012)

As people become interested in topics like self-development or spiritual develop-

ment, in own life or family life improvements, these *NRMs* websites adapt their

content to such demands, and provide them necessary information. People and youth are invited to volunteer, to participate, to be involved in conversations to CS's "global community", or to volunteer to SG's human rights and ecological activities or to FI's child protection activities.

As people are attracted by concepts like harmony, ecology, self-development, success, self-control, volunteering and because they are better persuaded by beautiful images showing happy persons or families, the NRMs adapt their web-content by offering an attrac-

tive public image (comparable with those promoted by international peace organizations) as alternative to traditional religious image which might be perceived as imposing social distance between a religious institution and its followers.

If churches' webpages are focused more on aspects assumed by their religious tradition, for the analysed NRMs webpages the religious aspects seems to be secundar and become usefull for solving people's social, humanitarian, community, family, individuals' and even ecological problems¹⁰.



Figure 2: Screenshot of *Boston Church of Christ* (www.bostoncoc.org - 15.12.2012)

As people's access to NRMs public discourse is facilitated by Internet, it is essential to have an interesting and attracting web-image. As their communities of adepts depend, in a greater manner, by online communities and virtual communication, the followers of a NRM have a greater influence on its public discourse¹¹, on the public image of a NRM.

If theologians, cardinals or religious Synods are responsible in reconsidering the

religious public discourse of Catholicism, Orthodoxy or mainstream Protestantism and in adapting them to XXI century religious needs, for a NRM, the online debates initiated by a website moderator, a person without formal religious authority and, possible, with no theological background, may have a similar role in adapting the religious discourse to cybersociety's needs and to people specific demands.

Figure 3: Screenshot of Soka Gakkai webpage (www.sgi.org - 15.12.2012)

For someone less interested in discussing explicit religious topics or analyzing life events through religious lens, a NRM webpage supply the necessary environment where these individualistic self-oriented topics are approached from a religious perspective and receive religious legitimation.

The websites listed previously and those included in figures 1 to 3 seem to be oriented in *attracting not only religious people, but also persons interested by trendy or postmodern habits, like self-development, human-potential development or self-empowerment. Christianity or Buddhism become platforms for promoting such fancy ideas.* For example, the *Christian Science's* web motto "Explore New Territories" sound more like an invitation to self-development, while the *Soka Gakkai* webpage invite visitors to reflect on engaging topics like "Peace Through Dialogue", "Transformation: it starts with one", "Engaged Buddhism for a changing

world" or "Empowering people at the grassroots".

As people are more attracted by *viewing images or movies than reading an online text, or by idea of debating a topic and not just receiving it in a passive manner, a NRM webpage offer them such experiences* through access to podcasts, forums of discussions, or through community dialogue. For adepts of new and, in most cases, small groups of a NRM, *the lack of a physical place, where people could participate to religious ceremonies, sermons or meetings, is compensated by the existence of an online "tangible" community of followers* that become the only plausibility structure for a NRM's territorially-dispersed believers.

Conclusions

We previously identified few important transformation of religious life generated

by a transition from institutional to non-institutional¹² forms of religious manifestations, from objective, external or formal religious structures to subjective and privatised religious thoughts and feelings. Such a process is more prevalent within NRMs, especially because their attention is more focused on religious community's needs, on attracting new followers, and less on doctrinal or theological aspects¹³.

We also showed that on Internet, any person can "visit" a churchless religion, can create and promote his own religion, can sample a wide range of alternative religious views (Dawson and Henneby, 2004, 152) or can be involved in interfaith net wars (Thomas, 2008, 140).

As any individual has, theoretically, the same chance of spreading its own religious messages like any mainstream religion the Internet produced a *democratization of religious market that favours individuals and small religious communities to compete against established religions*¹⁴. In this assumed religious competition, the NRMs are fully advantaged by Internet usage in spreading and constructing their public religious discourse.

While the Churches are more dependent on their own established traditions and institutional structures and the sects are dependent by their anti-establishment opinions, the NRMs have more freedom in proposing an innovative religious discourse and in finding new adepts. The NRMs are free to adapt their public image and public discourse contents' to demands of religious consumers that are more interested by subjective and private religious manifestations, instead of institutional and traditional aspects of religion.

The adepts, the religious community and not the institution or the religious doctrine seems to be the main focus of NRMs religious discourse as they try to

attract followers starting from their individual interests, and by providing them with a marketised, attractive and socially-desirable public image, instead of traditional religious images.

NRMs websites adapt their content to people information and community demands, and provide them with necessary information and interaction platforms. Although most activities where people are invited to participate receive a religious legitimation, the religious aspects seem to be less important than pro-social desirable activities promoted by NRMs.

As people are more attracted by viewing images or movies than reading online texts, or by idea of debating a topic not just receiving it in a passive manner, a NRM webpage offer them such experiences while Christianity or Buddhism become platforms for promoting fancy postmodern ideas.

Mainly, the NRMs' discourses seem to be characterized by their focus on followers and on lived religion. Addressing people who are geographically spread and heterogeneous categories of populations many NRM use the Internet as main interface to communicate with members and attracting new members.

By delivering a pleasant image and access to an interesting online experience and also by "promising" a pleasant experience within the real group the NRM online communication tools solve two important aspects of any religious group. At official and organizational level it supply the necessary image for attracting many people and delivering public credibility. At individual level, by delivering a *less traditional, less theological, more flexible, more marketized and follower-oriented* public discourses, a webpage attracts more people including those less religious.

Notes

- ¹ This paper is supported by the Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development, financed from the European Social Fund and by the Romanian Government under the contract number POSDRU/89/1.5/S/ ID 56815/E/1859.
- ² Scholars adopted the term *new religious movements* (NRMs) in order to avoid the pejorative connotations of the popularly used term *cult*. The term covers many types of religious movements and groups: religions that were introduced into a culture by missionary representatives from world religions abroad (ISKCON) or other Asian-based religions with converts in the West, as well as Christian groups in China and Japan; religious groups that were brought into new cultural contexts by recent immigrants, such as Muslims in the West; groups that evolved out of a more established tradition, such as the Branch Davidians, which emerged from Seventh-day Adventism; reconfigurations of religious themes in traditional religions, such as Kurozumikyo, Tenrikyo, and other new religions in Japan; revivals of suppressed religious traditions, such as contemporary Pagan movements in eastern Europe; creative mergings of diverse religious traditions, such as the African Independent Churches, which combined Christianity with African beliefs and modes of worship, or the New Age movement's blend of different religions and spiritualities; imaginative and syncretistic re-creations of preexisting religious traditions, such as Neopaganism in North America; organizations that coalesced around new formulations of teachings found in alternative religious traditions, such as the Theosophical Society, which grew out of the Western Esoteric tradition and borrowed from virtually all the world's religions; or millennial movements that formed in response to new cultural conditions or oppression (Ghost Dance movement), or innovations (the UFO movement known as the *Raelians*). However innovative they may be, NRMs always utilize elements of earlier religious traditions as building blocks to construct their new theologies, practices, and organizations (Wessinger, 2005, 6513).
- ³ By Church we mean both *ecclesia* (national or official church of a State, like Catholicism in Spain, etc) and also religious denominations or mainstream religious groups (like Catholicism or Baptism in USA). Sects typically have prior ties to larger religious organizations from which they have intentionally broken off, while cults may be imports from another culture or independent products of the society in which they develop. Like sects, cults often find themselves in tension or conflict with broader society, simply by virtue of being new and different. What separates cults from sects in their relation to previous traditions is that cults typically do not have a history of institutional conflict and eventual separation (Gallagher and Ashcraft, 2006, xii).
- ⁴ Attracting an adept by criticising his or her religious system involves a consistent direct communicational efforts. The discourse and the preaching activity of Jehovah's Witnesses is a good example of face-to-face active and critical prozelytism.
- ⁵ Although these two opposite approaches can be both found within a sect and within a NRM, we consider the first is more prevalent to religious sects and the second to NRMs. We do not diminish or deny the role of Internet on churches' or sects' communication or religious practice. Also, we recognize the essential role of "non-virtual" communities in NRMs' evolution. But, for this paper, we'll focus only on how Internet transforms NRMs religious communication. *We selected NRMs instead of churches and sects because we consider this type of religious organization use better and extensively the Internet for attracting possible converts.*
- The literature dedicated to NRMs counts thousands of groups covered by this label. Many of them have a short existence; many have been spreaded only at local level. Our discussion and remarks about Internet impact on NRMs' religious discourse covers, obviously, those that have Internet presence, a relatively longer existence and a clear orientation to attracting new people within their group.

- ⁶ Although the borders between these three categories are blurred by partial overlaps, we prefer to operate this distinction for the theoretical clarity of our paper. We consider it is absolutely necessary to operate such a distinction and to offer these additional details, because as these are general phenomena or specific social processes that affect most religious groups from contemporary societies, and Internet's usage effects on religious communication might be easily confused with these trends.
- ⁷ Banal religion may consist of elements taken from institutionalised religion, such as crosses, prayers and cowls, as well as elements usually associated with folk religion, such as trolls, vampires and black cats crossing the street. Furthermore, banal religion may incorporate representations that have no necessary religious meanings such as upturned faces, thunder and lightning, and highly emotional music. These may, however, come to be associated with religious meanings through the media's representational practices. Banal religion is banal in the sense that it is unnoticeable and does not constitute a highly structured proposition about a metaphysical order or the meaning of life, and it is religion in the sense that it evokes cognitions, emotions or actions that imply the existence of a supernatural agency. As example of banal religion, let's consider the Indiana Jones adventure film series which is saturated with all kinds of religious symbols and practices taken not least from Christianity but also from Buddhism, Islam and various forms of folk religions (Hjarvard, 2011, 128-129).
- ⁸ Online religious communities are groups that facilitate interactions with believers who are separated by geography, but share some sort of spiritual connection or conviction. These are interactive groups, facilitating two-way interaction through various computer technologies such as e-mail or IRC. Some are created intentionally by a church or denomination while other are formed at a grassroots level by individuals. These communities congregate around an issue of faith, from a general topic, such as mysticism or spiritual disciplines, to a specific focus on a belief like the gift of prophecy or a religious affiliation such as Anglican or Baptist (Campbell, 2006, 179). No matter what technology is used, online religious communities revolve around common themes: experience, interaction, and connection. Members select the community they wish to join based on the type of experience they are looking for (Campbell, 2005; Linderman and Lövhelm, 2003 apud Campbell, 2006, 179). Cybertemples, online rituals, online communities and e-vangelism, information websites, chat rooms, and e-mail discussion groups dedicated to a variety of faith-related issues (Campbell, 2006, 178) are just few communication or interaction tools a religious group might use today on the Internet environment.
- ⁹ Following Fairclough and Wodak we'll consider the discourse (language use in speech and writing) as a form of "social practice." This implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s), which frame it: the discursive event is shaped by them, but it also shapes them. That is, discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned – *it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it* (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997, 258 apud Wodak and Busch, 2004).
- ¹⁰ If we shortly analyse webpages belonging to some important new religious movements of Christian (Christian Science, the Family International (<http://www.thefamilyinternational.org/>), International Church of Christ (Boston Church of Christ) and Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness (<http://www.msia.org>) or Eastern origins (Falung Gong – Falun Dafa - <http://en.falundafa.org/> – and Soka Gakai International) we observe that theological or doctrinal aspects are secundar while orientation to personal or community experimentation of a belief system seems prevalent.
- ¹¹ We should separate, of course, the public discourse from religious dogmas that might be considered as revealed to the NRM's founder in some cases.

- ¹² Internet offers information sources and creates new ways of accessing information and forming relationships across denominations. These developments signal an *emerging trend of personal autonomy in religious worship*. Information that was once obtained directly from clergy in face-to-face meetings can now be accessed from online sources (Wellman and Gulia 1999 *apud* Stout, 2006a, 173).
- ¹³ We clearly want to state that by making some remarks like “NRMs are” or “NRM do” we do not consider these as less important or less religious compared with approaches promoted by churches or sects. We consider any religious activities of a NRM or a sect as being equally important and equally religious with those of any church. The differences are induced only by their different manner of acting and their delivered online image which are different from those of traditional churches.
- ¹⁴ Searching on Google.com an expression like “Christian blogs” we found no less than 477,000,000 results. We easily can interpret this as proofs of interest for religious topics and as a proof that people, not only media, create religious discourses in extremely informal, diverse and non-theological manners.

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