Cyberspirituality: Constructing Religion through the Internet

by

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Introduction

*Regimenting Ritual in the Digital Age*

Entering the small church for the weekly Wednesday Worship service, members welcomed me enthusiastically: “Hello, sunflower!” “Good evening, sunflower,” “Did you have difficulty finding the space?” “Sunflower” was not my forename, surname, or even an affectionate nickname. I chose the name “sunflower” as my username to log in to the online Christian community i-church’s chat room Chapel. After one or two moments, the individual leading the service asked if all present members were ready to begin. When we had agreed, the prayer leader typed several dashes and a cross emoticon, designating the following chat room space for prayer. The leader began the evening’s worship with a self-written prayer, followed by a reading from the Gospel. She or he typed out each line of blessings and lay members refrained from typing unless the leader wrote a line that began with an asterisk. At the appearance of the asterisk before a verse of prayer, all parishioners also typed that verse. This was my first experience with cyber call and response. With call and response over the Internet, the confines of the chat room became a stage, each member on display as he or she repeated the blessing of the prayer leader. As a researcher, do I participate? Will the prayer leader wait for my response before continuing the service? I responded out of respect, but felt very aware of my decision.

Next, the prayer leader asked members to share prayer petitions. Parishioners offered names of individuals and descriptions of world conflicts for which they wanted the group to pray. After each user typed his or her petition, all parishioners lit a candle, or, rather, typed an emoticon of a candle. The symbol appeared to signify a
prayer from the user for the petition. After all members had written their requests, the
leader of the ritual closed the service with a short prayer. When the service concluded,
he or she typed another series of dashes and an emoticon cross, and all members
became vocal again, thanking the prayer leader and discussing their evening plans.
Although the prayers, intentions, and media change every week, i-church members
join together in the same prayer ritual every Wednesday nearly without fail.

The Cybershaman Tribe of http://cybershaman.ning.com also endeavors to
coordinate organized rituals. Members write on message boards, hoping to join
together in cyberspace and to simultaneously run the Causal Engineering Interface,
Cybershaman, in pursuit of a selected result. Cybershaman is a computer Radionics
program, a “tool” or an “interface” as its creator calls it, that allows users to organize
images, videos, and sounds in one virtual space for the purpose of focusing on their
desires and channeling power towards specific intentions, such as love or wealth,
when engaging in neo-shamanic practices.¹ Cybershaman aims to “unleash the
awesome power of the human mind.”² In other words, the program enables trance
and meditation for focused intent by providing a program in which users can arrange
visual and auditory media that facilitate it.

Cybershaman serves as a computer software adaptation of a traditional
shaman who, according to Lévi Strauss:

Becomes the object of transference and, through the representations induced
in the patient’s mind, the real protagonist of the conflict with which the
[patient] experiences on the border between the physical world and psychic
world…the patient receives from the outside a social myth which does not

¹ Ernie Vega, “Cybershaman Home,” Cybershaman, accessed March 13, 2014,
² “Cybershaman users group,” Yahoo! Groups, accessed March 13, 2014,
https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/cyber-shaman/info.
correspond to a former personal state...the shaman...questions [the patient]
and puts into her mouth answers that correspond to the interpretation of her
condition, with which she must become imbued.³

Similarly, Cybershaman users project visual and auditory representations of
personally desired states or situations into the computer program; the program
mediates the physical and the spiritual world in order to manifest these intentions.
Ernie, the creator, describes in the Cybershaman Manual, “what you are doing is
encapsulating the required components of causal manifestation and launching them
into the Universe as if a Shaman or Powerful Psychic would.”⁴ Essentially, in using
Cybershaman, members aim to capture the intentions of their minds and create a
system that, through images, sounds, color, and animations, channel energy into
achieving those desired goals. By transforming “Universal Potential” into specific,
computer “environments,” Cybershaman serves as a personally tailored tool for
meditation.⁵

In the Cybershaman instructional video Holly Conley explains, “Instead of
having to meditate all day long and affirming bliss, today I’m going to have
Cybershaman radiate the intention of bliss for me.”⁶ By listening to Holly’s video, I
began to understand that Cybershaman facilitates powerful meditation experiences
for its users because it takes on the energy and burden of the practice itself. As Holly
visually guides users through the steps for setting up Cybershaman, she describes how

³ Claude Lévi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology, trans. Claire Jacobsen, (United States: Basic
Books, 1963), 199.
⁵ omicron8000, “What is Cybershaman?” Cybershaman Manual, 37, accessed March 16, 2014,
⁶ Holly Conley, “free version of Cybershaman @ http://www.gocs1.com,” YouTube video,
8:47, August 26, 2009, accessed March 13, 2014,
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ziSslNkTDaY.
to organize the space. First she shows users how to include their personal intentions in the interface. She types the intention “bliss” into a box on the left side of the screen, and the “targets,” or who or what she desires her intention to affect, in a box on the right. In the video she writes, “myself,” “myfamily (sic),” and “myfriends (sic)” on separate lines in the “target” box. By typing intentions into these boxes, members pour their desires into the computer program.

Next, Holly teaches users how to choose animation and images tailored to their personal Cybershaman interfaces. “Glowing animation adds to the overall strength of intent,” she explains, indicating that images and their placement should echo the user’s individual intention. She encourages users: “play with it until you feel comfortable.” Construction of a Cybershaman interface, therefore, requires personal time and individual experimentation. For this demonstration, Holly chooses herbs as her animation and as she narrates, she details her reasons for choosing them: “I, personally, have chosen the resonance of the dandelion for the detox resonance, cayenne pepper … for pain relief resonance.” By describing why she chooses each image, the audience can begin to understand that arranging a Cybershaman Interface is a personal process. Next, Holly teaches users how to include the “tone” (or background music), numeric system, and color tone for their intentions, each of which should enhance the intention. “Now as the resonance of the bliss intent builds, we can hear it, see it, and feel it in the colors and symbols emanating from the animations

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7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
and templates,” she illustrates.  

Through Cybershaman, users channel computer energy to give their individual desires sound, visualization, and a sense of reverberating power. As Holly gives her final instructions to “relax our body and mind…focus our bliss intent from the center of our forehead and click the send button,” I witness how Cybershaman engages all of the senses; I see the animation move and glow and I hear a calm melody overlaid with the sound of running water: bliss. 

In group Cybershaman sessions, members try to organize users across the world to set their separate Cybershaman programs to the same intentions and settings in order to engage in spiritual practice together. Unlike the regular, weekly ritual of i-church.org, however, The Cybershaman Tribe does not appear to have successfully organized a synchronized group ritual. After trying to establish a common time to run the program, the users surrendered: “I think maybe it’s just best if everyone runs these sessions at whatever time is most convenient for them so it is easier for all to participate.” Although The Cybershaman Tribe succeeded in organizing members to focus their neo-shamanic efforts on the same intention, this cyber religious community could not organize a regular, time-specific ritual in the same way that i-church.org does each Wednesday.

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13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
The History of Religion through the Internet

Since the dawn of the Internet, individuals from different cultures and geographic locations have used cyberspace to connect, communicate, and enhance their daily lives. Cyberspace creates an arena not limited by time or space, but rather an environment intended for the interaction of different ideas from around the globe.\textsuperscript{16} Individuals use email, Internet forums, and chat rooms alike to build connections and establish groups based in a variety of endeavors: people trade advice on advancing in a profession, they build solidarity around illness, and they share experience about relationships. Online communities find a foundation in common values, visions, interests and ailments.\textsuperscript{17} Connections developed in the cyber world help individuals cope with their lives in the physical world; people take the information and advice they acquire online and apply it to their everyday lives outside of the Internet. These virtual communities become “meeting places for people not linked to a physical space.”\textsuperscript{18} By opening a web browser one can enter a cyber-hajj, a Zoroastrian temple, a space for Catholic Confession, or a virtual funeral. With the click of a button or the creation of a username, a person gains access to hundreds of traditions, communities, and users all with various aims, voices and ideas. Some websites intend to instruct and inform, others hope to support members’ individual faiths, and others create space for rituals.

Not only secular, but also religious online communities have flourished on the Internet for decades. In fact, the first online forum dedicated to discussions of religion

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{16} Christopher Partridge, \textit{The Re-enchantment of the West}, vol. 2 of \textit{Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture} (London: T & T Clark International, 2005), 135.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Heidi Campbell, \textit{Exploring Religious Community Online: We are One in the Network}, vol. 24 of \textit{Digital Formations} (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005), xvi.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., xv.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
and morality, the Usenet group net.religion, developed in 1983, only thirteen years after the birth of email. Why then do religious communities and rituals on the Internet continue to spark debate? In his book *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, Christopher Partridge raises the question of whether the use of the Internet as a religious space threatens the cohesion and strength of religious communities. He explains, “there has been much discussion over the years about the nature of such online social interaction … Is the Internet contributing significantly to the isolation of individuals from their families and societies as faceless people replace face-to-face interaction in real settings with random sociability?” Does Internet usage isolate individuals and prevent them from participating in social interaction and relationship building? How does the platform of cyberspace affect religious communities and relationships? With the rise of modern ideas and technology, institutional Christianity in the West has declined. This decline, however, does not necessarily reflect an increase in secularization and the disappearance of the sacred in society. The use of the Internet, a “faceless, technologically constructed space,” for religion only increases concerns about the desacralization of the modern world. By suggesting that the use of the Internet for religion can desacralize the modern world, these concerns propose that cyber religious rituals and communities are “inauthentic” and “lesser than” the “real” religious rituals of physical communities. By contrast, however, as we will see shortly, members of cyber religious websites describe their communities as equally

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19 Ibid., 4.  
21 Ibid., 1.  
22 Ibid.  
authentic, and in some cases even more authentic, than the religious communities
they engage with in the physical world.

The question of reconciling the difference between perceptions of the
“outsider” – the scholar or individual not initiated into the community – and the
experience of the participant of a cyber religious community becomes important for
understanding the prevalence and the endurance of religious communities in
cyberspace. Why do members feel a strong community presence in cyber religious
websites when many scholars, as Partridge illustrates, view these sites as a threat to
religious community? In order to discuss cyber religion, I use the term community as
described by sociologist Barry Wellman: “I define community as networks of
interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging
and social identity.”24 Community for this study, therefore, is concerned with bonds
of support, unity, and communication rather than cultural or geographic ties.

My study focuses on two central questions: Firstly, in what ways do cyber
religious communities maintain the structure and elements of their communities in
the physical world and in what ways do they diverge from them? Secondly, how do
these similarities and differences operate together through cyberspace to craft a sense
of community for participants? The question of what makes a religious community
“real” or “authentic,” while an important question to acknowledge, is not the central
focus of this study. The study aims not to pinpoint a definition of an objectively
authentic religious community, but it instead considers authenticity in the context of
how participants of online religious forums and chat rooms understand and

24 Barry Wellman, “Physical Place and Cyberplace: The Rise of Personalized Networking*,”
experience it. The question becomes not whether cyber religious communities are objectively authentic religious communities, but instead which elements of cyber religious communities draw individuals to these spaces and what elements, for the congregants, establish these communities and the relationships between members as more or less “real” as they practice worship.

**Terminology: Defining Physical and Cyber Community**

The use of terminology becomes an issue of particular importance in the study of cyber religious communities. In my work, I will avoid the use of the term “real” in reference to traditional, physical, mortar and brick religious communities because many participants of cyber religious groups consider their communities as “real” as physical religious communities. Instead, the study will use the term “physical” to describe traditional religious communities. The term “physical” proves valuable because it emphasizes the ability of participants of these communities to make eye contact or to hold hands in prayer while also illustrating how these communities are distinguished by the presence of multiple physical bodies in the same physical space.

In her book, *Exploring Religious Community Online*, Heidi Campbell distinguishes between the terms “online” and “offline,” describing “online” as “that which takes place in a computer network environment” and “offline” as “any facet of life occurring away from the computer screen.” In my study, I choose to avoid the term “online” in regards to cyber religious communities because it implies a dichotomy between “online” and “offline.” The impacts of relationships and rituals created in cyber religious communities, however, are not isolated only to the “online” world.

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Campbell notes, “Religion online mirrors the trend of people merging their online activities with their offline lives.” The term “cyber” similarly implies a distance between physical bodies, however, while the term “cyber religious community” also creates a distinction from physical religious communities, it does not create the same set of binaries and instead recognizes how the influences of physical communities and Internet communities alike can intermingle.

While the lessons, rituals, and bonds of physical religion do not disappear when a participant exits a physical church, synagogue, mosque or other religious space, they similarly do not disappear when one “logs off” from “online.” For this reason, the relationships and communication between members of cyber religious communities will not be referred to as being “on” or “in” the Internet, but instead as being created “with” or “through” the Internet. The terms “physical” and “cyber” therefore construct distinct spaces for the practice of religion, emphasizing the difference between a community of physical bodies that can interact under the same roof and a community in which these bodies are separated. Both terms, however, also allow for the dissemination of ideas, relationships, and virtues across these spaces.

*i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe: Variety in Cyber Religious Community*

The following study focuses on two specific cyber religious communities: The Cybershaman Tribe of cybershaman.ning.com and i-church of i-church.org. i-church is a Christian community founded by the Diocese of Oxford in the United Kingdom and based on Benedictine principles. Although i-church was founded in the United

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Kingdom, its members come from countries across the world. Many elements
distinguish i-church from other cyber communities, such as prayer resources, forums,
blogs, connections to The Diocese of Oxford, and cyber chat rooms for prayer and
discussion. i-chuch establishes two aims: “to enable people who want to know more
about Christianity to find out more and to support people in their journeys of faith.”\textsuperscript{28}
i-church works towards both goals by providing educational resources for site visitors
to learn individually about prayer, Christianity, and the Anglican Church, while also
creating a space in chat rooms and forums for dialogue, interaction, support, and
community. Because this study focuses on how people establish and build religious
communities and relationships through cyberspace, its discussion of i-church will
concentrate primarily on its message boards and chat rooms.

Although both websites emphasize the importance of community and spiritual
support in their mission statements, the aim of The Cybershaman Tribe differs
somewhat from that of i-church. The Cybershaman Tribe describes itself as
“dedicated to the exchange of ideas” with the aim of “support[ing] each others (sic)
efforts.”\textsuperscript{29} This description remains enormously vague—the “efforts” are not defined
by the site but individually established by each member. In this way, The
Cybershaman Tribe, unlike i-church, does not appear to be founded by or rooted in
one established historical tradition with a defined institution. Although i-church
accepts members from all backgrounds, its foundation lies in the specific tradition and
institution of the Church of England. The Cybershaman Tribe however, allows
members to incorporate many religious traditions – such as Transcendental

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{29} Ernie Vega, “The Cybershaman Tribe,” \textit{The Cybershaman Tribe},
Meditation and trance – into their spiritual practice in order to excel in the discipline of Causal Engineering and to succeed in manifesting intentions. Martíňková illustrates:

Cybershamans … view computer technologies … as a space … where they are able to journey into. The ‘usual’ cybershamanic religious experience of journey into altered planes is based on the assumption that there is a sort of spiritual energy, someway ‘flowing’ in the computers or in the computer networks and the cybershamans can interact with it.  

Although The Cybershaman Tribe does not base itself in one tradition, the members of the Tribe all utilize the same Causal Engineering Interface, “Cybershaman” to interact with the spiritual energy flowing in computers and to engage in acts of focused intent, directed towards their personal dreams and desires. The blending of member autonomy and unity in Cybershaman will be a central focus of this study.

The Cybershaman Tribe website allows users of Cybershaman to ask each other questions about the program, to encourage each other in their efforts for wealth, happiness, and love, and to voice their own intentions so that other members can offer advice and even run Cybershaman sessions for them. Through discussion forums, groups, pages for member media, and a question and answer page, individuals from all over the world interact and enhance each other’s spiritual experiences and lives.

The Cybershaman Tribe and i-church represent two very different sectors of cyber religion. While i-church finds its roots in Anglican Christianity, a Western religion with an established tradition, authority, and institution, The Cybershaman

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Tribe is a part of New Age spirituality, drawing from diverse traditions such as Paganism and Buddhism. Focusing on more than one community allows this study to examine the larger phenomenon of religious communities and relationships built through the Internet, rather than simply serving as a case study of a specific website. Although comparing these two spiritualties may initially appear to be a futile effort, I believe that by looking at these dissimilar traditions and by examining their similarities in methods, structures, and goals, I can gain a more holistic understanding of the role of the Internet in the creation of religious community.

One must consider differences between i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe, on the other hand, with respect to the differences between their traditional backgrounds. One can also understand differences, however, through the frameworks of community aims, cultures, or simply website creators’ styles. I will examine differences not through the lens of which community’s methods and elements are “better” or “worse,” but I will instead explore site differences in the context of how they function within each community, what they suggest about the relationship between the two communities, and how they facilitate the construction of cyber religious community on a larger scale.

Although the i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe differ in tradition, I chose these websites because of their strong Internet presences. While The Cybershaman Tribe has nine hundred twenty-five members, i-church has seven hundred thirty-five members. The Yahoo! Cybershaman users group, which predates The

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Cybershaman Tribe, furthermore, has one thousand sixty-two members.\textsuperscript{33} While these numbers do not indicate how many individuals participate in the websites frequently, they do signify how many people have actively decided to sign up and engage with the communities. Considering both communities have significant histories—The Cybershaman Tribe appears to have started around 2010 but began as a Yahoo! group in 2003 and i-church began in 2004—this high level of membership indicates that the two websites provide captivating spaces. This study examines how community becomes constructed through these appealing cyber religious websites.

In order to examine i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe, I draw my research from public community forums, groups, blogs, and chat rooms. Additionally, I posted voluntary surveys onto the forums of each site, entitled “i-church: Building Religious Community Through the Internet”\textsuperscript{34} and “The Cybershaman Tribe: Building Religious Community Through the Internet,”\textsuperscript{35} respectively. Each survey asked site users to answer questions such as: Why did you first decide to participate? Did you look at other online communities? Do you engage in physical spiritual practice? If applicable, how is your experience in your cyber community different from physical spirituality? Why do you return to this community? Do you feel close to the community, and if so, why? Have you ever met with other members of your cyber


\textsuperscript{34} Alexandra Sokolow, “i-church: Building Religious Community Through the Internet,” accessed March 31, 2014, https://docs.google.com/a/wesleyan.edu/forms/d/1GBI0KLVoA1UhtODwDfxclyHP_lrnWUhivAUjq2VCC6U/viewform.

\textsuperscript{35} Alexandra Sokolow, “The CyberShaman Tribe: Building Religious Community Through the Internet,” accessed March 31, 2014, https://docs.google.com/a/wesleyan.edu/forms/d/1_HxUQb2r0QTXqsqk3lArAx9CYEMJJe6P34fBFzV4qE/viewform.
community in an offline context? The questions remained as similar as possible on both surveys, only changing in the context of the specific website and the spirituality of that site.

While multiple i-church members provided lengthy and insightful responses about their experiences with the i-church community, unfortunately only one user of The Cybershaman Tribe responded to my survey. A few i-church users shared that they had participated in other research surveys in the past, so perhaps the community’s history with research made it more comfortable with the request. i-church, furthermore, requires researchers to contact the Priest in Charge and to discuss their research with her. Following this discussion, the i-church Council also votes on the study. This formulized method for research requests perhaps gives members a sense of safety and security when responding to the surveys posted on the forum walls.

The Cybershaman Tribe, on the other hand, does not have a formulated system for research requests. Participation in these studies, therefore, remains entirely the choice of individual users who must decide to trust researchers on the Internet. My experience posting the surveys, in fact, reflected the major institutional differences between i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe; the response of each community to my research request gave me a small taste of how the presence of authority in i-church establishes legitimacy and comfort while also illuminating the member autonomy of The Cybershaman Tribe. How religious authority and spiritual subjectivity function together in cyberspace will comprise the body of this work.

Regardless of why i-church members engage more readily with research surveys, all data for i-church comes from survey responses as well as my personal
examination of the website, its chat rooms, and its forums. Data for The Cybershaman Tribe, on the other hand, derives largely from my exploration of the website and its pages and features, although the one survey response also provides insight into the direct experience of a community member. The study does not and cannot search for “truth” or “inauthenticity” in individual statements in response to the survey, in chat rooms, or on forums but only works with the information as presented on and through the sites.

Chapter Outline: Understanding Authority in Cyberspace

With this study, I aim to examine how religious community is constructed through cyberspace in both i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe. In order to look at how community is constructed through these websites, however, I must first examine what kind of community members perceive on them. The first chapter discusses the demographics of i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe as well as the reasons why participants join the sites. It considers participants’ stated intentions for engaging in cyberspirituality as well as their decisions to become involved with these two sites, specifically. The chapter looks at geography, age, individual goals, as well as the focus on community, and ultimately establishes both i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe as communities focused on building relationships and communal support.

The second chapter examines the structures of i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe. It looks at how each site demarcates space and how the spaces and symbols of both sites emulate and retain elements of their physical-world counterparts. The chapter begins by looking at the three platforms for discussion
shared by both i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe: blogs, message boards, and chat rooms. Next, the chapter focuses on the questions: How does i-church maintain the structure, traditions, and institution of a traditional Anglican Church? In what ways do members of The Cybershaman Tribe retain a sense of subjective spirituality as reflective of the New Age movement? How do symbols and structures used in community and conversation compare to those outside of the cyber community? How do they function with respect to the level of authority and subjectivity of each religion in the physical world? By and large, how religious institution and spiritual autonomy separately but simultaneously support conversation and community remains the central focus of this chapter.

How The Cybershaman Tribe constructs institution in individual-focused neo-shamanism and how i-church members demonstrate spiritual autonomy despite the community’s foundation in The Church of England forms the basis of Chapter Three. By inverting the binaries of institutional and individual spirituality, this chapter begins to reveal how cyberspace opens up new opportunities for religion. i-church provides various avenues for individual spiritual expression and The Cybershaman Tribe structures an institution and authority around the computer program Cybershaman, its creator, and the language used by both. Moreover, this chapter considers how these new frameworks enable novel opportunities for communication, support, and community through the Internet.

The conclusion of this work addresses scholars’ critiques that cyberspirituality desacralizes society and degrades human sociability. It explores how i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe both offer new opportunities to engage with the sacred while also promoting communication and relationships in both physical and
cyberspace. The conclusion, furthermore, illustrates how the blending of institution and autonomy crafts cyber religious community. While institution in both i-church and The Cybershaman tribe enables unity around a shared organization, language, and leader, spaces for individual spirituality and discussion of personal experiences produce an open and intimate community where members can learn from and care for one another. Finally, the conclusion looks not only at how these websites echo traditional and physical organizations and communities, but also how the Internet, the mediation of spirituality through text, and the constant opportunity for communication in cyberspace forge out novel communities, complete with culture, language, and institution.

By looking at the institutional structures of cyber religious websites and their member’s goals, I aim to understand how the platform of cyberspace supports religious community. The study looks at how The Cybershaman Tribe and i-church share features with their physical world counterparts while also investigating the structures and characteristics of these communities that distinguish them from physical world neo-shamanism and Anglican Christianity, respectively. Although I focus on i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe specifically, by looking at these similarities and differences together, I hope to construct a more holistic understanding of how religious community is shaped through the Internet.
Logging in to the Café chat room of i-church, one can never predict the
direction of the conversation that will develop over the course of social hour.
Sometimes the gathering proves solemn—members discuss the ailments of their
family members or current struggles in their daily lives—but other times the
atmosphere appears upbeat. Although individuals obscure their faces behind screens,
personalities reveal themselves. People laugh and joke—sometimes about their age,
sometimes about buying each other a “beer” (with a beer-drinking smiley face
emoticon included), and other times about the technological failures of the chat room.
Despite not occupying the same physical space, users learn who can talk for hours,
who feels comfortable just listening, and who thrives on a night out at the ballpark.
Individuals’ trials, interests, and personalities unfold over the wires of cyberspace and
as I participate, I begin to understand that cyber communities (and in the case of i-
church, cyber religious communities) do not exist merely as the websites that sponsor
them, but instead thrive through the interaction of the personalities, histories, and
lives of the individuals who connect through them. My experience in coffee hour
illustrates Karaflogka’s notion that “cyberspatial discourse … must be perceived as a
changeable and unforeseen structure, having the capacity to adapt itself according to
visions, fantasies, inequities and inventiveness of users.”

While The Cybershaman Tribe does not have a “Café,” or a chat room designated for a regularized social gathering, the personalities and goals of its participants similarly establish the dynamic of the community, as revealed through the community forums. Individuals from around the globe translate their posts and messages into English to communicate with one another. Some members voice the desire to win the lottery, other users state the intention of winning back an ex-lover, and other individuals simply struggle with money and the hope of finding a job. Together, these voices and those that reply to them shape the nature of the community participating in The Cybershaman Tribe and the tools used by the community to promote individual spiritual journeys.

In order to understand how the religious communities of i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe are shaped through cyberspace, we must first look at the composition of each community and members’ intentions in first approaching these sites. Campbell argues, “Religious motivation uniquely shapes the technology employed by a religious institution.”37 Demographics such as location, age, and religious identification both influence the communities’ functions, discussions, and methods and also reveal how cyber spirituality benefits its practitioners. By looking at why individuals say they first joined these websites, we can understand what kind of religious communities people seek out through the Internet (if they seek out community at all). This question provides a basis on which The Cybershaman Tribe and i-church can be compared: are the two websites creating the same kind of community? In many ways, I believe that yes, The Cybershaman Tribe and i-church

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37 Campbell, “Making Space,” 312.
construct similar spiritual, cyber communities, rooted in member support and fellowship. Revealing the similarities in these communities, as a well as understanding what type of community each website specifically creates, provides a vital foundation for any insight into what elements shape them.

*Understanding i-church: Geography*

As explained in the introduction of this work, the Diocese of Oxford in the United Kingdom founded i-church in 2004.\(^{38}\) In many ways, i-church remains firmly grounded, geographically, in Oxford and in the United Kingdom. The Diocese of Oxford, for example, licenses the i-church Priest in Charge. Additionally, i-church operates in the time zone of Oxford: Greenwich Mean Time or, in the summer months, British Summer Time. i-church, however, also exists in cyberspace, free of national borders. As a website, i-church.org becomes part of a global network that individuals from around the world can navigate in order to access its forums, chat rooms, knowledge, and values, illustrating Karaflogka’s notion that “The Internet belongs to no one. It also belongs to everyone.”\(^ {39}\) Members create cyberspace culture through interactions rather than by adherence to a culture affiliated with an institution or a constitution. The nature of the Anglican Church as the official Church of England, however, complicates the international possibilities of i-church. The question next becomes: how global is i-church? Does the prospect of international participation shape the way the community functions?

In order to look at i-church as an example of cyber-religious community, one must look at membership. Since 2008 (when i-church first began recording

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membership), i-church has accumulated seven hundred thirty-five users. Some of these members have participated for the past five years, others have remained loyal followers since the beginning, and still others created a username, poked around a bit, but never came back. In the past year, one hundred twenty-four members have signed in to i-church. Of those one hundred twenty-four members, fifty-two people registered as members in the past year and ten people have been members since 2008. Each week, users meet on Wednesday evenings at 8:30pm, Greenwich Mean Time, for prayer in the Chapel chat room and Friday evenings at 8:00pm, GMT, for social hour in the Café chat room. Each week since September 2013 (when this research began and i-church resumed services after its summer break), I have witnessed up to nine users in each chat room at one time. Although the figures remain rather small, different individuals attend different prayer services and rarely do all of the same members attend every week. While at least one administrator has been present at every ritual, not all administrators attend every service. These differences in congregation composition create a new environment in every Chapel or the Café gathering. Together, all of these participants along with the “lurkers” create the cyber community of i-church.

Of the one hundred twenty-four members who have visited i-church in the past year, ten participants responded to my voluntary research survey about the role of the Internet in shaping religious community. Before diving into questions about goals of participation in the community and elements that secure individual

41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
membership, the survey examined the geographic locations of users. Of the ten participants who chose to include their geographic information, nine members resided in the United Kingdom and one individual lived in the United States. Despite the international nature of the Internet, ninety percent of responders to the poll currently live in the United Kingdom. While these results only reveal the demographics of a small sample size, eight of these members describe themselves as a “regular participant of i-church,” indicating a steady presence of members from United Kingdom in the community. These figures illustrate that while i-church remains open to people all over the world, the United Kingdom – the country of i-church’s creation – remains visible among its regular following.

Other features of the i-church community also appear to indicate a strong connection with United Kingdom. For example, Wednesday worship held on October 23, 2013, remembered St. Frideswide of Oxford.44 Throughout the service, the prayer leader told the story of this patron saint and addressed prayers to her.45 At the end of the service, a member additionally acknowledged his or her geographic connection to St. Frideswide.46 This service revealed the intimate connection between the i-church community and Oxford, located in the United Kingdom.

Furthermore, in response to the question, “Have you ever met with other i-church members in an offline context?” three members replied that they had attended an offline retreat some years ago. Hosting an offline retreat requires choosing a geographical meeting location, which may exclude members who live far away and who cannot travel to the physical gathering. For this reason, the retreat would most

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45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
logically take place at a location where multiple members already reside, in order to accommodate as many members as possible. All three of the retreat attendees indicated that they live in the United Kingdom. These responses seem to suggest that the retreat also took place somewhere in the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom, therefore, remains a geographic connection not only for individual members of the i-church congregation, but also for the community as a whole.

One could easily assume that this geographic presence in i-church remains directly related to the Church of England’s power in the United Kingdom and its role as the officially established church. My data, however, complicates this notion for two reasons. Firstly, although all participants of the survey indicated that they identify as Christian, not all responders from the United Kingdom identify as Anglican – in fact, two of the nine individuals from the United Kingdom do not identify as Anglican. The relationship between i-church and the United Kingdom, therefore, does not relate only to those users hoping to seek out the Anglican community. Secondly, the two individuals who currently do not live in England do identify as Anglican. Both a member from Scotland and a member from the United States, two nations without a national church, identified as Anglican in their survey responses. When asked, “What elements of i-church keep you coming back?” the person from the United States expressed interest in “meeting new people mostly in England.” Although, as someone living in the United States, this person appears geographically disconnected from the foundation of the Anglican community, he or she voices an interest in forming relationships and connecting with that community internationally. Furthermore, this individual has been a participant of i-church “from the beginning”; the availability for international interactions appears to largely impact this user’s long-term i-church
membership.

The member from Scotland similarly stated a desire to connect with England and specifically with the Church of England. When asked why he or she first joined i-church, the participant of two years, explained: “I was baptised (sic) and confirmed within the Church of England and ichurch gives me the chance to continue in my chosen denomination despite living many miles away.” Despite his or her physical distance from England and from his or her church, the international space of the Internet enables him or her to participate in the Church of England. This participant additionally explained, “I live in a very remote part of the Highlands of Scotland with no public transport … so I needed somewhere to worship and feel a part on a daily basis.” Geographical isolation prevents regular participation in a physical church for this individual; i-church, located on the Internet, can provide a space for worship that transcends geographical barriers. This data illustrates Partridge’s claim that “Transcending the bodily, the geographical, and the temporal, the digital world is the sphere of the spirit, where time and space no longer limit what is possible.” In the case of i-church, the Internet frees Anglican Christianity from the confines of space and geography of England.

Although the survey shows that many regular i-church participants live in the United Kingdom, we must not trivialize the presence of members from across the globe. One British participant reported, “members are more diverse and international,” as a difference between i-church and physical church. Regardless of the number of international individuals active in i-church, their participation creates an opportunity for diversity and changes the nature of the community from a local

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one to one where thoughts, experiences, and practices across the world can meet.

Responses from i-church participants in the United Kingdom (but outside of Scotland) and especially responses from those living in remote areas similarly revealed the desire to connect over geographic distance. When asked why he or she first decided to join i-church, one individual from the United Kingdom indicated, “I had just moved to a rural area after living all my life in cities and was feeling a bit isolated so this was a way of connecting to the wider church.” Much like the user from Scotland, the geographic isolation of this participant directly affected his or her decision to look to the Internet and to i-church for religion. Another individual from the United Kingdom expressed the limitations he or she faces “in how [he or she] can go out and meet [other i-church members] in person.” i-church allows for human connections and relationships despite geographic barriers. The individual who recently moved to a rural area noted similarly to the individual from Scotland that “the potential for connecting with members across the country and the world” secures her membership with i-church. Even though regular participants come from the United Kingdom and England, members desire to connect with others across the country, across space, and even across the world. Even users who do not feel physically disconnected may wish to connect with the Anglican or Christian Church beyond their individual parishes. While multiple active members do reside, geographically, in the United Kingdom or England, i-church remains international in that anyone across the globe can participate. Furthermore, participants express openness to and desire for international connections in their participation with i-church. i-church, therefore, exists not only in England, but also across the United Kingdom and across the globe.
Understanding i-church: Age

The demographics of age affect both the goals of i-church participants and the kind of community that the website creates. Individuals in different stages of life have different concerns. A community of elderly men and women who struggle with health engage in different conversation topics than a community of twenty-year olds who struggle to find jobs and paths in the world. Bringing age groups together can create an atmosphere of advice, deep thought, and respect.

Responses to the voluntary survey, “i-church: Building Religious Community Through the Internet,” reveal a wide age range among i-church users. Of the ten responders, no one reported being younger than twenty years old or older than eighty years old. Seventy percent of participants reported being older than fifty years old – five between the ages of fifty and sixty-four and two between the ages of sixty-five and eighty. Although the majority of participants in the survey are middle aged or older, one person wrote that he or she was between the ages of thirty-five and forty-nine and two individuals shared that they were between the ages of twenty and thirty-four.

Nine of the ten participants described themselves as regular participants of i-church. Even amongst this small sample size, i-church does not exclude younger people from regular participation on the site, and, according to their answers, these younger members do not seem to feel uncomfortable with the older crowd. In fact, one user between the ages of twenty and thirty-four has participated in i-church for five years and the other member in this age group has been a participant for fourteen months. The data suggests that age differences within the community have not prevented these users from engaging with i-church over extended periods of time. One member explains, “because the experience of i-church is mediated through text, I tend to
forget about large differences in status, which can make i-church seem more
democratic.” Although one can largely decipher age through conversations, the chat
rooms seem to allow people of different ages to comfortably approach one another
and form relationships in a way unlike a physical church where age remains visible.

While age does not prevent younger participants from engaging with an older
crowd, age does shape both the usefulness of i-church as well as the conversations that
prevail in its spaces. For example, i-church provides a worship space for users who
have become isolated due to age and health issues. One member explains:

Age tends to reflect what we talk about and how we talk … many members
appear to use i-church because of health issues … Of course, that is not always
the way, but in many instances when you chat to someone you will find out
life has not been perfectly rounded out health-wise in recent years.

Older forum participants, for example, often explain in the Café or on the
forums that they have close loved ones (spouses or friends for example) who are in the
hospital. Between hospital visits and work, they find difficulty in attending worship
regularly. Other individuals find themselves in the hospital. One individual (aged
between fifty and sixty-four) explains, “When I was in the hospital I was able to keep
in touch via text messages.” Despite this member’s inability to attend physical church
during his or her hospital stay, i-church enabled him or her to still participate in a
religious community. Of course, health issues do not affect only older i-church
members. One individual between the ages of twenty and thirty-four, for example,
explained his or her inability to attend physical church, partly based on a “serious
health burden.”

The issue of health, however, arises regularly among the older i-church crowd
and shapes the type of conversation and community that i-church perpetuates. One
participant explains, “i-church is a reflective and introspective community members come to [in order] to be healed.” This response raises the question: Healed how? The use of the terms “reflective” and “introspective” by this user indicate mental and emotional healing, achieved through shared faith and emotional support among a caring community. Health issues, furthermore, oftentimes indicate a greater need for emotional support and friendship. One member describes her time in the hospital: “I knew the community was praying for me.” This member’s comment, tied up in age and health, reveals the function of i-church as a community of spiritual and emotional support.

**Understanding i-church: The Search for Community**

While some participants of i-church come to the site to avoid isolation due to geography, age, or poor health, others simply seek new relationships and an intimate community. Some members immediately found i-church and remained loyal, monogamous lovers of the site, others sought community through other churches, both online and in the physical world, and multiple individuals continue to practice in multiple churches today. In reviewing the statistics, one begins to see how, for some members, turning to the Internet for religion is simply one step in a larger search for a close but diverse community.

Several regular members of i-church also participate in physical church. When asked, “Do you consider yourself a Christian,” all ten survey responders said “yes.” Of these Christians, all ten also answered, “yes,” to the question, “Have you ever participated in a physical, mortar-and-brick church?” Every participant in the survey, at some point or another, attended a physical church. When asked the question, “Do
you currently participate in a physical, mortar-and-brick church?” seven of ten
members responded yes, and one individual stated that he or she “would like to.”
Physical church remains a part of several i-church members’ lives. Because the value
of physical church in these members’ Christian practices was not surveyed, whether
the data indicates that i-church is simply a secondary resource to physical church
cannot be determined. The data, however, does indicate that participation in
traditional Christianity among these i-church participants is not on the decline.
Although these figures only reveal the practices of a small number of i-church users,
the fact that multiple self-identified “regular” participants of i-church also attend
physical church suggests that cyber church and physical church can coexist and that
involvement in cyber religion does not necessarily indicate a decline in participation
in physical religious communities.

Many i-church members also participate in multiple cyber religious
communities. For example, one member explained that he or she had been
participating in “the online interactive Church of Fools (Methodist) … and hoping for
the [Church of England] to start one.” This user’s response indicates denominational
preference in his or her online church participation. Moreover, of the ten responders
to the voluntary survey, seven participants “[looked] at other churches online before
choosing i-church.” This data suggests that participation in an online church can
involve choice and discretion. Even after these individuals found other websites, they
continued their search for cyber religious community. Of the ten responders, only
three continue to participate in other online churches and only two participate in
other online religious communities. All five of these individuals indicated that they
looked to other online churches before coming to i-church. The data implies that of

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the seven individuals who browsed other churches online, four of them no longer participate in online churches other than i-church. These numbers reveal that even among a small sample size, i-church members seem to show care in selecting a cyber-religious community and indicate that these users searched for and enjoy certain elements specific to i-church.

Specifically, individuals appear to seek relationships, support, and fellowship from i-church. When asked in a survey, “Why did you first decide to participate in i-church?” one Anglican member from the United Kingdom, aged fifty to sixty four years old, voiced that the “more constant presence of community” brought him or her to the site. Not only does the sense of community maintain this individual’s membership, but it also drew him or her from the start. Additionally, this user’s reply suggests that, through the Internet, the community experience of i-church remains “constant” and always open to communication, rather than limited to the operating hours of a physical church. Other i-church members express similar desires for community in their answers to the question, “What elements of i-church keep you coming back?” A British Anglican member, aged twenty to thirty-four, asserted that “The sense of community, fellowship and support, the prayer support and the wisdom of other members” maintain his or her membership, while another British Anglican user, aged fifty to sixty-four, similarly responded that “[prayer] and community Spirit” keep him or her at i-church.

Even individuals who did not initially come to i-church in search of community have become avid members because of the community element of the website. One individual explains, “I became an Anglican and wanted to find out more about the church that I joined.” This member initially sought knowledge and
information about the Church of England from i-church. This person, however, describes how even after five years as a member and regular participant, “community [and] interactions” keep him or her at i-church. Although this individual approached i-church with information-focused goals, the relationships retain his or her membership. Another person who initially joined out of curiosity and who participates in other online churches answered, “The relationships with other people” sustain his or her participation in i-church. Furthermore, an individual who stated isolation as the primary force in his or her membership regards the “quality of discussions” as a factor that he or she appreciates in i-church and that keeps him or her returning to the site. Even a survey participant who had only been an i-church member for one day voiced that he or she sought a place to be “honest” with “more time to speak and listen” in i-church. This member comes to i-church in search of a community based in open communication.

The need for communication and relationships permeates i-church and drives individuals to engage with one another through the website. As discussed in the following chapters, the desire for community becomes apparent not only in the survey responses, but also in the i-church forums where members write “Hello” posts that introduce themselves to the community and in the “Prayer” forum where individuals voice personal prayers, in hope of community support. These posts exhibit community not only in the original posters’ desires to introduce themselves to the community but also in the pages of replies welcoming and supporting them. In fact, “The instant spontaneity of friendship and welcome … received on [his or her] first visit,” directly impacted a user of two years’ sense of closeness with the community.
Communication, advice, and the community even sustain the membership of a person with largely individual intentions. From the outset, this person understood that the “strict policy” of i-church prevented him or her from sharing the “experiences that damaged [his or her] faith.” Because he or she cannot speak freely about, he or she does not feel close with the community. This member, however, does feel a sense of support from the community: “a more gentle kind of support … that helped me think systematically about my faith, and roles in church.” The user refers to physical church as a “real community” and expresses hope in both joining a physical community one day and in experiencing the “closeness” that he or she believes physical community can provide. Although he or she does not feel close with i-church, “chat features; the community around the calendar; the guidance from a priest,” maintain his or her presence in the community. This member additionally remarks, “Certainly I haven’t felt discriminated against while using i-church because I am unemployed, and the constant questions about what’s next don’t seem to happen, which is very restful.” This comment indicates that the user feels a certain level of acceptance from the community, even if he or she does not feel comfortable revealing his or her entire past. Relationship and communication facets of i-church, moreover, appear to ultimately retain his or her membership on the website.

Whether yearning to bridge geographical distance, to receive support for health conditions, or simply to build friendships, i-church participants state communication, human interaction, and relationships as primary concerns in their involvement with i-church. i-church, therefore, exists as a primarily companionship and support-focused community. Understanding how a successful cyber religious
community is built through i-church therefore requires looking at what elements and structures of i-church foster relationships and maintain the bonds of community.

**Constructing The Cybershaman Tribe: Geography**

Unlike i-church.org, The Cybershaman Tribe does not exist as a component of a traditional, institutionalized religion or religious body. Although one man from New York created The Cybershaman Tribe, the website holds less of a tie to this one geographic location than i-church holds with Oxford and The Church of England. Neo-shamanism is not linked to a specific country or city, but instead functions “to re-establish a link for modern man to his spiritual roots, to re-introduce shamanic behavior into the lives of Westerners and to renew contact with nature.”

According to Jakobsen, neo-shamanism is “an individualized interpretation of spirituality.” Unlike the Church of England, neo-shamanism depends on individuality and the subjective experiences of human beings. In the context of their individual lives, followers of neo-shamanism try to “[make] sense of suffering, death, [and] general conditions.” Furthermore, shamanism does not adhere to specific designated rituals, but instead exists as a “flexible configuration of behavior patterns [such as] magical light, trance, [and] mastery of spirits.” Because of the diversity in practice and its individualistic nature, New Age “attracts and encompasses many different types of people.” Neo-shamanism does not exist as one established church to which differences in practice or beliefs can pose a threat. Even outside of the space of the

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49 Ibid., 147.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid., x.
52 Ibid., 150.
Internet, neo-shamanism’s subjectivity and lack of singular authority allow it to be a spirituality that survives across geographic borders and that attracts diverse individuals.

Placing such an assorted spirituality into the eclectic realm of cyberspace, therefore, seems logical. Sociologist Brenda Brasher believes Cyberspace “diminishes the relevance of location for religious identity.”\(^\text{53}\) Just as members from all over the world can participate in neo-shamanism in the physical world, so too do they flock to The Cybershaman Tribe online. The administrator of the website, Malachi Constant or “Ernie Vega,” states on his public member page that he lives in the United States. Furthermore, the website functions in the English language. Like Ernie, each member has a profile on the website where he or she can publicize his or her name, gender, and location. The Cybershaman Tribe has nine hundred twenty-five members.\(^\text{54}\) Of the nine hundred twenty-five members, eighteen individuals did not list their country of residence.\(^\text{55}\) Four hundred forty individuals (or 48.5\% of the nine hundred seven individuals who listed their country of residence) say that they live in the United States.\(^\text{56}\) Despite the fact that The Cybershaman Tribe has no institutional or religious connection to the United States, nearly half of the participants say they currently live in the same country as the website’s founder. Interestingly, however, Indonesia, the United Kingdom, and India, with sixty-five, forty-seven, and forty-six members, respectively, follow the United States as the most popular countries or

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\(^{\text{55}}\) Ibid.

\(^{\text{56}}\) Ibid.
residence for users of The Cybershaman Tribe. Common language, therefore, cannot be the only draw to The Cybershaman Tribe, for Bahasa Indonesia is the official language of Indonesia and Hindi is the official language of India. Not only are the four most common countries of origin for The Cybershaman Tribe members located on three different continents, but members overall also list themselves as living in eighty-four different countries and on all seven continents.

Not only do members who create a username and join The Cybershaman Tribe come from around the world, but active participants on the public forums also engage with one another across national lines. For example, in the Forum, “Community Stuff,” individuals from the Netherlands, France, the Philippines, the United States, the United Kingdom and Austria all post about topics as diverse as “Internal Chi-gen” and “Get your ex-lover back.” Although bridging geographic distance does not appear to function directly in the goals of members’ spiritual journeys, the group does address notions of geographic distance and the international nature of the community in organizing group practices. Because the website functions in English, some individuals need to use a web translator tool to communicate. For example, one French individual introduces him or herself on The Cybershaman forums, thanking the community for its acceptance and explaining that he or she uses a translator to speak properly. The use of a translator indicates that this member

57 Ibid.
desires to engage internationally with the Cybershaman community, despite geographic and language barriers.

Additionally, when one individual expressed his or her desire to find a job, in order to best help, another member first asked about the economy in his or her country. The helping individual replied, “I know what the economy is like here in the United States. What is it like in Australia?”61 This question suggests an awareness of cultural differences between members on The Cybershaman Tribe as well as a desire to better understand the other individual and his or her situation before providing assistance. Moreover, in trying to organize a group ritual with the Cybershaman interface, one member addressed the issue of geography when she wrote, “Keep in mind that the people in this group are from different parts of the world so general good luck is very helpful, but the specifics of winning the Lottery may not apply to all.”62 The group searches to find common “Intentions in Wealth and Prosperity,” however, the means of prosperity may not apply to all users because of the nature of the website as an international space.63

Finally, although no participants directly state the intention of connecting with other international users, some individuals address topics of an international nature. For example, one member from Austria started the forum topic, “Prayer for the Gulf of Mexico,” which includes the prayer, “I send the energy of love and gratitude to the

63 Ibid.
waters and all living creatures in the Gulf of Mexico and its surroundings.”

This public Internet thread suggests that while the individual may not intend to communicate directly with the United States or the Gulf of Mexico, he or she aims to send blessings to this location and to engage with it on a spiritual level. The love and gratitude for which he sets his Cybershaman intention is not restricted to his geographical location, but instead transcends borders, countries, and bodies of water.

Furthermore, in the discussion of setting up a group Cybershaman session, one individual explains, “Some of us live in other countries … I’ve found All of us focusing in one area [of the world] at once has a pretty strong effect.” This member suggests, similarly to the member sending blessings to the Gulf of Mexico, that group energies and intentions can be sent across the world to benefit other members. However, this member also claims that the group aspect of setting intentions and running Cybershaman from around the world creates a more powerful experience. Through the group of The Cybershaman Tribe, international individuals can benefit each other’s lives and spiritual practices and send positive energy and blessings across space.

Unlike with i-church, individuals do not appear to explicitly state bridging geographical distance as a goal in using the program Cybershaman or in joining the Tribe. Some individuals even aim to create location-specific sectors of The Cybershaman Tribe. For instance, one Italian individual started a thread entirely in Italian. With translation the post reads, “All Italian Users. Hello everyone I am also

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Italian and I would like … to try to collect a list of … Italian users to exchange information more easily. This member attempts to unify Cybershaman users around nationality and language.

Despite the pockets of The Cybershaman Tribe based in nationality, this website, much like i-church, does allow for the international dispersion of blessings and energy across the globe. Like i-church, The Cybershaman Tribe exists as an international community. Additionally, The Cybershaman Tribe fosters international partnerships for the fulfillment of each other’s intentions, whether those intentions include winning the lottery or saving the life of a dying bird.

**Constructing The Cybershaman Tribe: Individual Intent**

While members of The Cybershaman Tribe do not express goals of escaping geographic or health-related isolation, they do share other Cybershaman intentions through public forum and blog posts, which members’ aims in engaging with the Tribe. The survey participant, who has been a member of the Tribe for “probably a half dozen years,” reported that he or she explored other cybershaman or neo-shaman cyber communities before choosing The Cybershaman Tribe. While this user affirmed that he or she currently participates in other online religious communities, he or she does not engage with other cybershaman communities. Membership with The Cybershaman Tribe, therefore, involves choice, selection, and perhaps a fondness for certain aspects of the particular site.

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Much like how some members arrive at i-church in search of knowledge about the Church of England or materials for individual prayer, many people join The Cybershaman Tribe in order to learn how to use the program Cybershaman. Some individuals want to know how to download the Cybershaman software on different computer systems,\(^68\) one person experienced extreme difficulty with installing the interface,\(^69\) and another member asked questions about how to use the geometric symbols available in the program.\(^70\) These requests about functional problems with the software pervade the Tribe’s forums. In this way, The Cybershaman Tribe enables members to share technical and technological information.

Members, however, not only seek technical knowledge from The Cybershaman Tribe. The survey participant explained that he or she first joined The Cybershaman Tribe because “Sometimes [my] kids have questions indicating a need for a slightly deeper answer.” Rather than suggesting a search for practical information, this reply indicates a desire for meaningful responses to and discussions about spiritual questions. Many Tribe members seek advice about which Cybershaman settings they should use to pursue their personal intentions. For example, one individual from The Netherlands intends to “get [his] ex-lover back.”\(^71\) He asks where in the interface he should arrange the picture of his ex-lover in order to

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achieve the best results.72 The user wants to know if his or her placement of the picture is “suitable” and asks for alternative methods and “tips.”73 This request remains less technical than the questions about how to download the program, involves situation-specific information, and calls for answers rooted in the personal experiences of other Cybershaman users.

Intentions about love pervade the forums of The Cybershaman Tribe. Another individual, from Austria, also asks for aid in restoring the love of his “ex-lover who [he or she] intend[s] to marry.”74 This person asks for help in choosing the settings of Cybershaman – the images, sounds, and animation – that will enable him or her to “reverse the case [of his ex’s lack of love].”75 This individual includes details about his or her situation and looks for human advice about the personal issue. Not all questions about romance, however, concern lost love. One member, for example, needs help gaining confidence around women and “making [women] think about” him or her.76 While both of these users voice romantic intentions, the advice other members offer each user remains specific to his or her case.

In the case of the Austrian user trying to win back his ex-lover, the website creator replied, “You can use the program to change yourself in a way that promotes harmony with another … Your personal circumstances may be things you want to keep private. If this is the case then it will be difficult for someone to tell you what

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72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
settings to use. Ernie’s response reveals how advice about personal intentions must remain specific to the individual case; only in truly understanding a person’s situation, can another member give the appropriate advice. This advice, therefore, becomes less technical and more personal. For the person lacking confidence, the administrator suggests he “[uses] symbols/images that represent confidence.” He even suggests using images of Richard Gere to represent confidence with women. Because this user provided more details about his troubles and desires than the Austrian member, the administrator could offer more specific and constructive aid. These kinds of requests, therefore, involve personal communication between members through The Cybershaman Tribe Website.

Other Cybershaman Tribe members express not romantic aims in using Cybershaman, but occupational, educational, and financial intentions. One person from the Philippines desires “to sell a property” and asks for assistance in “settings to run [his or her] intention.” Much like the user who wishes to reclaim the love of his or her former flame, this Tribe member requests help with a specific, personal issue and the advice he requires does not apply to all Cybershaman users. Another individual asks for “the right configuration, program and symbols (sic), to help [him or her] have great grades.” This person seeks situation-specific advice and support for his desire to achieve his educational goals. Other members express much more

78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
desperation with their problems and intentions. For instance, one member lost his or her house and business and struggles to pay rent. This individual, like many others, wants to change his or her life financially. This case, however, remains entirely distinct from the others. The questions these members ask, therefore, do not involve generalized, technical knowledge that can come from a manual or video but instead require interaction between human beings and advice crafted from personal experience and with consideration for the other person’s problem and goals.

As in i-church, health remains an intention commonly discussed on The Cybershaman Tribe forums. Much like love and prosperity, health remains a very individual-focused intention. One person from Niue asks for the best settings and images to treat myopia and to “restore perfect vision,” a second user searches for a configuration solution to become a hermaphrodite, and another member, who identifies as a “beginner,” requests assistance with curing Morgellons Disease. Morgellons is a skin condition “characterized by creeping, crawling, and stinging sensations” and often described as thread-like fibers under the skin. The medical community, however, disputes whether Morgellons is a physical disease or a

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psychiatric disorder.”

Needless to say, finding the correct settings to run a Cybershaman session intending to cure a person of Morgellons appears very specific to the person with the health ailment.

As with love, the health intentions of The Cybershaman Tribe members differ considerably. Each desire remains specific to the particular user, and the advice other members can give to each user also differs dramatically. Offering health advice on The Cybershaman Tribe, much like love and financial advice, requires communication between humans and explanations of personal situations and experiences. Moreover, although the personal programming of Cybershaman and the intentions of its members often remain individual and personal, this interaction between users suggests that the website itself focuses largely on communication, relationships, and community-building.

Constructing The Cybershaman Tribe: The Search for Community

While many users of Cybershaman come to The Cybershaman Tribe for advice on personal issues, other members of the group desire to support one another and to form a powerful community that makes a difference in the world and in other members’ lives. Participants of The Cybershaman Tribe, much like members of i-church, enjoy the support of the community and often engage with the website because of its supportive environment. The survey participant identified “communication” as his or her primary intention in using the website, further noting that “dialogging (sic) with members [offers] insights into the nature of those seeking” and proves helpful to his or her spiritual practice. This user does not search simply for

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87 Ibid.
answers, but instead for the human interaction and exchange of ideas that provide those answers.

As Ernie, the administrator, states on the site’s homepage, The Cybershaman Tribe aims to “support each others (sic) efforts.” The phrase “each others (sic),” immediately indicates a mutuality in the relationships between Tribe members. The advice given to users about their personal questions, the attempts to arrange group rituals, and the sharing of success stories through the site reveal its communally supportive atmosphere. One user explains: “As a member of the Tribe we are here to share info and help one another :-)”. While members of The Cybershaman Tribe typically have individual intentions and goals, the space also provides a caring community.

Individuals logging in to The Cybershaman Tribe forum often express desires for fellowship with the group. For instance, one person from the United Kingdom asks, “maybe someone can help [me] and run session for me at your CS computer? I will do [the] same for you … helping is good for karma and chances to get result is bigger.” The post suggests that he or she comes to The Cybershaman Tribe not only searching for advice from another person, but also for a partner in spiritual practice. The user explains that by helping each other, their results might be better. This individual’s question implies a search for support from the community and not simply for an answer. The user not only asks for help, but also offers help in return.

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88 Vega, “The Cybershaman Tribe.”
implying that he or she desires equality and mutual cooperation in his or her relationship with both the other user and the entire community.

The sense of communal care in The Cybershaman Tribe also appears when members band together to send good thoughts to specific individuals. When a tornado hit the neighborhood of the Cybershaman creator, another member asked the community to send “good wishes and healing intentions” for his sake.91 The sharing of personal information and the demonstration of support in this post implies a caring and concerned relationship between members of the Tribe and their site’s creator. Furthermore, the post suggests that members keep the creator in their “intentions,” indicating that spiritual practice with Cybershaman remains not only individual but also concerned with the wellbeing of others. The members of the Tribe intend to help one another and support each other through difficult times.

The sense of support also appears in the post by a member who wishes to advise other members after the good fortune in “curing [his or her] girlfriend of Morgellons disease.”92 The member describes two failed attempts to cure the disease: he or she first set the intentions to “address the parasites themselves” and secondly, to prevent the parasites from using his or her girlfriend’s body energy.93 Next, he described his successful settings: “[I] ran a trend where all the signals and energies they utilise (sic) for propagation and multiplication to be inverted and used as ‘deconstructive’ or ‘killswitch’ instructions, This worked beautifully and we could see

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93 Ibid.
results the next day.”94 With this description, the author steers other users away from his unsuccessful Cybershaman endeavors and instead invites them to use his settings and methods for their personal experiences in curing Morgellons. Furthermore, at the end of his description, the user exclaims, “Certainly you are welcome to contact me, I would be happy to help any way possible :).”95 Rather than coming to The Cybershaman Tribe seeking advice, he or she appears to join the community in hopes of sharing his success and aiding others in their endeavors to cure Morgellons. By offering him or herself as a contact, the poster suggests a sense of care for the community and a desire to help other members, an eagerness emphasized by a smiley face emoticon.

The “Groups” of The Cybershaman Tribe also exhibit community and spiritual partnerships. These groups provide support for other members’ lives. For example, Ernie created the “Breath Work” group, which has twenty-four members today.96 He writes, “I have been asking myself what can I do to contribute to this community? The answer is ‘Breath Work.’”97 Ernie’s statement implies that he, the administrator, created the group with the goal of helping the community. From the tagline on the first page to the act of creating the “Breath Work” group, one can infer that Ernie intends The Cybershaman Tribe to exist not simply as a means of acquiring technical information (for he has written a Cybershaman manual for that), but rather as a community of support. In the comments section, Ernie and other members share videos and advice on what methods help them in their meditative and

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94 Ibid.
95 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
spiritual practice. The group appears not to directly address the individual intentions of specific users, but to benefit the group members collectively, creating an environment where individuals share resources, communicate, and help each other practice the spirituality best appropriate to their individual lives.

The attempts of members to organize synchronized rituals further reveal the nature of The Cybershaman Tribe as a community of partnership and support. Scanning the groups of The Cybershaman Tribe, one finds many individuals keen to participate in “mass intentions” and to run the Cybershaman program together as a group. For example, in the “DREAMS and DESIRES” group, one person from Germany suggests running a “mass intention and [involving] as many people in as many groups as we can get going at one time.” The intention includes the phrase: “For the positive and good of our world, our loved ones and ourselves.” The intention suggests a hope to organize a spiritual ritual among the community of The Cybershaman Tribe that jointly benefits of all of its members as well as the world at large. The survey participant affirms that “the opportunity in a few cases to share meaningful experiential aspects of spirituality” has proven helpful to his or her spiritual practice. This user therefore recognizes communal practice, facilitated through The Cybershaman Tribe, as a positive and valuable aspect of the community.

This attempt to organize a ritual through The Cybershaman Tribe is only one

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98 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
effort of many, initiated by various individuals. In the group “Psionic Playground,” a person from America attempts to organize a group intention of winning a Publisher’s Clearing House Sweepstakes and splitting the winnings among the participating members.\textsuperscript{101} Much like the German user hoping to rally members together to spread good fortune to all Cybershaman members and the world, this person desires to join Tribe members together in a communal goal – this time to win a sweepstakes. The post suggests that the efforts of The Cybershaman Tribe can foster a space for community and partnership in shared goals. Another user also suggests a group intention in “Wealth and Prosperity.” This user asks:

I am requesting that as a group, we come to an agreement as to which methods, one at a time that we would like to use to conjure up some money wealth and opportunities. Then in what order and how so that each person involved gets a chance to reap the benefits. Or that we arrange to do one big jackpot for all of us to share evenly.\textsuperscript{102}

This statement reveals a wish to create a communal ritual in which many members of the group can partake and from which all members can benefit. This post, unlike the one about Publisher’s Clearing House, does not involve an intention requested by the poster, but instead suggests that members discuss intentions and methods. In this way, the entire organization of the ritual is a community process; not only the ritual, but also the scheduling and the establishment of the ritual involve communication, consideration, and relationship formation.


The Supportive Cyberspiritual Community

Although cyber-shamanism exists as primarily an individual-focused spirituality while The Church of England structures itself around an established institution, both religions offer space for support and friendship through the websites of i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe. Through these websites, members from around the world can join together in cyberspace to share their beliefs and practices. Although users may arrive at the websites for individual reasons, both sites foster communication, advice and friendship. The fact that survey participants involved in both sites indicated that they have met with other users in an “offline context” further illustrates a desire for human interaction and relationships, rather than simply a quest for solutions to personal problems. Members find human connection in the form of group practice, prayer, and simply in asking for and giving emotional support. The question next becomes: how do these websites enable the construction of support-focused religious communities? Partridge suggests that “a shift towards understanding community as a network” is at work and “Networks” are built by the choices and strategies of social actors.”¹⁰³ In order to understand the cyber religious communities of i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe, therefore, we must look at the strategies and elements of the “social actors” that construct them.

Chapter Two: Preserving Physical Practice in Cyberspace

The next two chapters of this study concern themselves primarily with how the websites of The Cybershaman Tribe and i-church.org utilize specific structures, methods, and strategies to create communities that foster support and relationships between members. First, the study will look at the layouts of the two websites. It will consider the similarities and differences between The Cybershaman Tribe and i-church and how each site demarcates (cyber) space in order to facilitate communication and relationships. Next, the chapter will delve into how the layout, tools, and symbols of each site exhibit its spiritual tradition. It will strive to answer the question: How do the sites reflect the levels of institutional authority or user subjectivity of their respective religions in the physical world?

In essence, both The Cybershaman Tribe and i-church.org exist as demarcations of cyberspace. With the URLs http://www.i-church.org/ and http://cybershaman.ning.com/, i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe, respectively, separate themselves from all other websites, both secular and religious, illustrating Stephen D. O’Leary’s claim that with the Internet “we witness an attempt … to sanctify a portion of this space as … an establishing of difference within the world outside as well as with other territories of cyberspace.”104 Although O’Leary discusses the claiming of space in cyber Neopagan rituals, i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe similarly establish the borders and boundaries of their distinctive communities within the context of the Internet. Although the ideas and the relationships developed through the sites can transcend their borders (ideologies and beliefs will influence

individuals as they make purchases on Amazon or as they read news articles online, for example), these URLs claim ownership over certain plots of cyberspace, marking them as the property of each community. Despite what one can find on other websites, within the (virtual) space http://www.i-church.org one finds a community praising and delighting in the Christian God and within http://cybershaman.ning.com one finds a community of individuals harnessing spiritual energy through the use of computers and Cybershaman.

These websites, however, not only create boundaries between their virtual spaces and other websites, but they also delineate space within their respective websites. The layouts of these sites and the spaces they create begin to shape how the websites construct social communities that foster supportive relationships. The homepages of both The Cybershaman Tribe and i-church reveal numerous tabs and links to webpages deeper in the sites. On The Cybershaman Tribe website, one finds an assortment of links at the very top of the homepage, creating a header of

resources. The links are immediately visible and accessible; with these links, any user can plunge into whichever part of the site he or she chooses. The tabs read: “Home,” “Wall,” “Member Area,” “Discussions,” “News,” “Projects,” “Media,” “Content,” “Library,” “Links,” “Portal,” and “Q&A.” The names of these tabs are straightforward; most users can accurately infer that “News,” “Content,” “Library,” and “Q&A” would be primarily information-based webpages and that engaging with other members might take place in the “Member Area” or “Discussions.”

The “Members Area” tab provides users with links to the spaces, “Members,” “Member Photos & Images,” “Member Videos,” “Member Blogs,” and “Member Publications.” Each link allows users to engage with one another in different ways: through text in the “Members” and “Member Blogs Section” and through visual media in the “Member Photos & Images,” and “Member Videos” sections. The “Discussion” tab also provides access to communication with other members. By clicking “Discussion,” a user can participate in “Groups,” “Forum,” “Chat,” or “Video Chat.” The “Library,” on the other hand, provides literature on “Radionics and Psionics” as well as access to books and articles available for site visitors to read online. These resources facilitate members’ personal searches for knowledge.

While these links connect users to particular plots of cyberspace, specifically marked off for different informational and communicational purposes, the title of each tab announces what kind of space lies beyond it. The Cybershaman Tribe tabs,

105 Vega, “The Cybershaman Tribe.”
106 Ibid.
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
therefore, both fragment cyberspace and mark and bound it so that users can participate in the site’s various activities at their discretion. These platforms allow members to share with one another in different ways – through personal stories, knowledge from a book, or helpful videos, for example. Because pages such as “Home,” “Wall” (one’s personal profile), “News,” “Content,” “Library,” “Links,” and “Portal,” however, primarily promote individual reflection and practice, this study will focus largely on the opportunities the “Member Area,” “Discussions,” and “Q&A” provide for community building.

The home page of i-church.org similarly provides a plethora of links that demarcate different spaces within the website. As with The Cybershaman Tribe, the home page of i-church displays important links at the top of the page.

The names of i-church’s links – “Gatehouse,” “Courtyard,” “Blogs,” “Support Us,” and “Community” – are less transparent than those of The Cybershaman Tribe. Because we will discuss the use of terminology and the creation of a space-specific language in depth later in this chapter when we consider how the structure and format of i-church reflect the institution of the Anglican Church, let us now focus on the how i-church uses links to separate webpages for distinctive purpose. The space of the “Gatehouse” serves as i-church’s homepage, allowing visitors to access all of the community’s resources; the “Courtyard” provides access to the public forums and as well as the “Chapel” and the “Café” chat rooms; “Blogs” links users to the blogs of all i-church members; The “Support Us” link allows users to make financial contributions to i-church; and “Community,” while suggesting a space to talk, actually serves as i-church’s “About Us” page. Through each of these links, users gain access to new spaces of i-church filled with a variety of information and different kinds of communication.

One also finds different links in the middle and at the bottom of the i-church homepage. The information in the middle of the page changes seasonally and is often accompanied by images representative of the links’ destinations. For instance, during the winter season, the homepage housed links to the i-church “Advent Calendar,” accompanied by a picture of a starry sky, and the “Advent Book Club,” accompanied by a picture of a book. Additionally, the central part of the homepage always includes links the “Courtyard” (forums and blogs), i-church Liturgies, the “Prayer

Forum,” and “Let Us Play!” appears most unusual on this webpage full of resources; this link connects users to a gaming space. “Need to unwind for a few minutes? Why not play with our hamster, poke our penguin, take out your frustrations on our bubblewrap (sic), or play our games?” the caption reads as an animated penguin dances beside this text. Although this gaming space seems odd amongst the spiritual resources of i-church, it provides another outlet through which members can escape their personal struggles. In this way, “Let Us Play!” like the “Courtyard” and “Prayer Forum” links that surround it, offers a sense of support and recognition of the personal difficulties that members may face.

The bottom of the page primarily offers links to informational resources. Here, members find the “Prayer Resources” section. “Prayer Resources” provide users with links to i-church’s “Prayer Requests” community forum, four outside websites with daily, written prayers, and a meditation website. Additionally, the “Explore i-church” section allows access to the site’s forums, blogs, Twitter, Holy Week Prayers (one for each day of Holy Week) and interfaith prayers. This section offers users various methods for engaging with i-church and allows them the opportunity to figure out which ways suit them best. The “Connect” section provides links to The Diocese of Oxford’s official website, information about the founding of i-church, legal information, charity details, and other websites for furthering one’s Christian education. Many of these outside websites incorporate humor into their Christian teachings such as “Cartoon Church,” full of political cartoons about church and The

112 Ibid.
113 Ibid.
114 Ibid.
115 Ibid.
Bible. Finally, the “Contact” section provides contact information for the Priest in Charge, Pam, the Technical Coordinator, Caroline, and The Trustees, as well as another opportunity to donate financially.

The links at the bottom of the page, with a few exceptions, present mostly tools for individual prayer and learning, while the links in the center and the top of the page focus more on discussion and building community. This placement of community-focused links at the top and center of the page enables easier and immediate access to these resources, perhaps indicating that support and relationships remain the central focuses of i-church. Much like with The Cybershaman Tribe, all links remain important to the creation of i-church as a supportive community, however, in this chapter, we will focus primarily on the community and relationship-centered structures of the “Blogs,” “Courtyard,” and “Chapel.”

Conduits of Communication: Blogs, Forum, Groups, and Chat

Although each site may attribute different titles to these spaces, both the i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe websites include blogs, forums, and chat rooms, which enable discussion between members. Each of these venues, marked in cyberspace by links and URLs, promotes a different type of communication while also contributing to the ability of users to engage with one another, discuss a variety of topics, support each other’s spiritual journeys, and learn from one another. Blogs, forums, and chat rooms serve as powerful tools for building relationships, even on a secular level and specifically through websites like i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe. Before looking at how each of these platforms for communication functions in

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the specific communities of i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe, we will first
discuss how they facilitate communication in general.

Although blogging can enable individuals to support and understand one
another, it serves as a rather indirect platform for communication between members
in a cyber community. Both The Cybershaman Tribe and i-church create space for
the individual blogs of all members, separated by URLs in cyberspace. Blog posts
allow members to share their individual spiritual questions, reflections, struggles, and
personal lives with the group. For example, in January of 2014, one i-church member
wrote a blog post reflecting on the question, “Am I a Christian?”¹¹⁸ This user
discussed his or her personal struggle with the question in a public blog post, not
asking any questions to the community, but simply sharing his or her story and
reflecting on his or her journey, both with Christianity and finding God.¹¹⁹ In this
way, blog posts can allow users to simultaneously reflect internally, establish a sense of
self and identity, and also offer that self to the community. Blog posts need not only
include struggles and reflections, but can also offer new ideas and opportunities to
think about religious practice, ideology, and life. For example, one member on The
Cybershaman Tribe wrote a blog post that includes a video to a free Webcast of a
“Global Peace Fire Ceremony.”¹²⁰ The user does not share any inner reflections, but
instead introduces to other members a new opportunity for spirituality. Additionally,
this post illustrates that while blogs usually consist of words and texts – personal essays

¹¹⁹ Ibid.
¹²⁰ Pamylle, “Global Peace Fire Ceremony – Free Webcast from Kyoto, Japan,” The
Cybershaman Tribe, November 5, 2010, accessed March 16, 2014,
if you will—members can also include images, videos, emoticons and any media that help them convey their thoughts and feelings.

While the format of a blog post allows a single user the space to share his or her thoughts individually, the public nature of the posts allow other members to reflect on these ideas, to check in on their fellow community members, and even to discuss these thoughts through comments or private messages. One can find the blogs of The Cybershaman Tribe in the “Member Area” and the blogs of i-church in the “Courtyard.” Scrolling through the various posts, one sees that rather than linking users to individual members’ blogs, both sites connect visitors to blog posts by all members of the community, in chronological order. This ordering allows the ideas of many members come together, suggesting that posts do not belong solely to the individual author but to the entire community. For example, posts about everything from “Energy for Intentions. Energy to Utilize. Energy for Life,” “Malware Attack and the Law of Attraction,” “Abram Hicks – The Alphabet Game,” “Machine Awareness,” and “Spooky action at a distance = Bell’s Theorem” follow one after another on the Members Blogs page of The Cybershaman Tribe. This eclectic mix of posts by different users indicates that the ideas of individual members become community reflections on The Cybershaman Tribe Blogs page; thoughts become not internal questions, but struggles of the community as a whole.

The i-church blog list also reflects the notion that members’ blog reflections

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become the reflections of the collective community. Clicking the “Blogs” link at the top of the page immediately connects visitors to the list of “Recent Blog Entries.” Here one finds posts as diverse as “Why MOOCs and I are friends” which details the benefits of online courses and how they are similar to Church, “Lenten Reflection” which focuses on Psalm 3, and “Entry number one” which serves as a personal reflection on emotions and spirituality in wake of life’s difficult periods. Much like with the blog list of The Cybershaman Tribe, this assortment of blog posts suggests that ideas expressed by members belong to the community as a whole.

The fact that blog posts inherently do not require responses distinguishes them from other forms of cyber communication. While the public nature of the posts welcomes comments and conversation, reflection appears to be blogging’s primary purpose. In a voluntary survey, one i-church user described his or her desire to use blogging as a spiritual platform: “Mostly I’d be interested in documenting my spiritual experiences over the long term … I think this may help me feel less discouraged.” For this user, blogging enables deep spiritual reflection and hope for emotional healing; the public nature of the reflection, however, also allows for the reflection to take place within a community space. Comments on blog posts, therefore, involve little to no urgency, allowing members to take time and put thought into their responses and conversations.

Still, many users do appear to converse with others through their blog posts. For example, the i-church blog post “Entry number one” received five responses from members who wished to help the original poster through his or her difficult time by

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Ibid.
sharing personal experience, advice, and prayers. Although post’s author remarked that he or she did not expect any replies, he or she expressed gratitude for the comments and the community’s care for his concerns. The member’s lack of expectation of a response indicates that the post served more for self-reflection than for communication. His gratitude for responses, however, suggests appreciation of the support he received from the community. In this way, the blogs of both The Cybershaman Tribe and i-church allow all users both the opportunity for personal introspection and the ability to share their ideas, thoughts, and struggles with the community.

Much like blogs, message boards (also called forums) provide a space for members to express thoughts, questions, ideas, and struggles through posts. The posts serve as public documents into which members can spill their thoughts through language, symbols, and media. Like blogs, message boards do not require immediate responses or discussion, and therefore can be crafted carefully and thoughtfully. In reply to my voluntary survey of i-church, one user wrote, “In a physical church if there is a discussion one has to think of what to say at the time : in i-church I take my time to think of an answer.” In fact, similar to blogs, message boards do not require any response. This same user comments, “I have a choice to answer posts or not.” Individuals can read and learn from forums without ever engaging with the poster.

Forums, however, differ from blog posts in a few important ways. Firstly, while blogs create personalized spaces for individual members, forums are designed to belong to the entire community. While an individual may create a thread (a post) on a

126 Ibid.
forum and choose the question or topic of discussion, the thread serves as a group
discussion between equal voices. The space of forums and the threads within them
belong to no individual member. In this way, forums become democratic
environments: spaces for communication and the flow of ideas, questions, and
thoughts between all members.

Unlike blogs, forums are not primarily intended for reflection, but instead for
conversation, for finding solutions to members’ questions, and for interaction between
individuals across space. Writing one’s troubles, thoughts, or ideas on a message
board implies a desire for answers, evidenced by the fact that many threads are
crafted as questions. “The Deep End” forum of i-church, for example, serves the
purpose of discussing “weightier theological issues.”127 Inquiries into “women
covering heads?” “Baptism or Christening?” “Should Scripture be our only life
guide?” and “Why do bad things have to happen?” as well as many other questions
fill the first page.128 The abundance of questions on the forum indicates not only a
desire for answers, but also for human engagement and in-depth discussion of the
topics at hand. The interrogative nature of these posts beckons a response as opposed
to blog posts where members may not expect or desire any. The name “message
board,” furthermore, indicates that what occurs in this space is communication. By
definition, a message is “a piece of information that is sent or given to someone” or “a
communication in writing, in speech, or by signal.”129 Messages suggest interaction

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church.org/courtyard/index.php.
webster.com/dictionary/message.
between people and communication, rather than simply personal reflection; boards full of messages, therefore, also serve the purpose of communication.

Message boards and blogs also differ in terms of organization. Whereas blog posts of different members are listed on both sites chronologically with diverse topics listed one after another, message board threads are organized by categories. While i-church uses five categories: “A Place to Talk,” “Prayer,” “The Deep End,” “Chapel and Chat,” “Advent and Christmas,” The Cybershaman Tribe has twenty categories including: “General,” “Community Stuff,” “Requests by Holly Conly,” “CS VII,” “CS VIII,” “Remote Healing,” “Radionics,” “Experiments,” “Cybershaman Stories,” and “Settings.” Each topic creates a message board specific to the entitled category, allowing individuals to engage more easily with the discussions they find most interesting, important or relevant. By making topics accessible, the organization of forums promotes communication.

The organization of posts within these categories also reveals the communication-focused nature of the message boards. Posts with the most recent

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131 Vega, “The Cybershaman Tribe.”
responses appear at the top of each board. The preference for and accessibility of the posts with the most recent responses indicate that threads on message boards are privileged by the popularity and frequency of conversation. This sense of organization, once again, reveals the communication-focused goals of forums.

Unlike i-church, The Cybershaman Tribe also has a section for “Groups.” “Groups” are located within the “Discussions” space of the website, suggesting that their aims are communication-minded. Groups appear similar to forums in that members can create a group focused on a specific topic such as “Breath Work” or “General Experiments,” write a post explaining the goal of the group, and open the group to communal discussion among members. The Cybershaman Tribe currently has ten groups dedicated to different topics or practices. Much like forums, groups enable thoughtful and open discussion about spiritual ideas and experiences between community members. “Groups” and “Forums,” however, differ in that members can “join” groups and become “members” of specific groups, claiming a place in them. Groups become smaller communities within the larger framework of The Cybershaman Tribe. Joining a “Group” suggests not only a desire to communicate with other members of The Cybershaman Tribe but also a desire to unite with other users in a common cause, ideology, or discussion. Intentionally joining a group implies a decision to belong to and participate in both The Cybershaman Tribe and smaller communities within the larger framework of the website. Joining a “Group” suggests not only the desire to engage in conversation

133 Ibid.
134 Ibid.
about a certain topic, but also the willingness to pledge allegiance to a community. In
the ability to pledge membership, groups become more exclusive and more centered
around a core community than either message boards or forums.

Unlike groups, forums, and blogs, chat rooms do not allow for slow,
thoughtful responses but instead create a space for instantaneous communication.
Both i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe utilize chat rooms, which function as
O’Leary describes: “A conference or chat room … is a real-time connection in which
everyone who enters the “room” may post a message that will be seen immediately by
all who occupy that particular corner of cyberspace.”\(^{135}\) Just as walls and doors create
boundaries that separate a physical room from a building, so too do boundaries
separate a chat room from the rest of the online community in which it functions. A
chat room is a space where different members can enter and engage in real-time,
communal conversations and express thoughts rapidly with all present users.
Campbell elucidates, “Chat is an example of how the Web can provide a meeting
point for individuals of similar interest and convictions to connect with one
another.”\(^{136}\) Both i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe reflect Campbell’s notion of
chat rooms as “meeting points,” or bounded spaces. Only individuals who have
signed up to be members and who have a username and password can access the chat
rooms of both sites. The chat room of The Cybershaman Tribe appears as a toolbar
at the bottom of the browser. On this tool bar exist two boxes: one box that shows
which members are currently online and a second box, called the “Main Room” that
provides a separate space for chatting with all online users. A member can also click a

\(^{135}\) O’Leary, “Cyberspace as Sacred Space,” 46.
button that opens both the list of online users and the chat space together as a separate window. Even as a user navigates the different webpages of The Cybershaman Tribe, the chat room remains open and physically in front of any text on the open web browser.

While access similarly remains restricted to only registered users, the i-church chat room functions differently from that of The Cybershaman Tribe. Users do not immediately appear in the chat room by virtue of logging into the site, but must deliberately click the “Chapel” link on the i-church homepage in order to enter the chat room. Furthermore, this link does not open as a toolbar, but instead as a separate Internet window; in order to navigate different Cybershaman Tribe webpages while the Chapel is open, members must use new windows, otherwise they will exit the chat room entirely. Despite their differences, the chat rooms of both


communities remain marked off from the rest of the website that hosts them. This isolation of chat space and the requirement that members sign in to the room suggests exclusivity in the chat discussion, inaccessible to all absent persons.

The instantaneous nature of chat room communication additionally enables cyber rituals and gatherings. Chat rooms facilitate personal conversations in real-time between multiple members across the world, crafting a space where individuals’ voices can be heard readily and where members can give instant support. Immediately after one user entered the Café, for example, all other present members asked him how his wife, who was in the hospital, was feeling. Members remembered the life challenges of this user and offered him support by checking in on his situation and sending prayers and kind words.

Chat rooms, moreover, provide a constant flow of new ideas on which members can reflect. As with the other cyber venues for communication, each member can introduce topics of their choice. In chat rooms, however, interaction flows freely, much like a physical-world conversation between two bodies in the same geographic space. Rarely are as much thought and care involved in crafting a response to a chat room message, as opposed to a blog or forum post, because by the time a member writes the perfect reply, the conversation might have advanced to a new topic.

Much like forums, chat rooms can be categorized and designated for different purposes. i-church chat rooms, for example, are separated into the “Chapel” for prayer, the “Café” for socializing, and a “Retreat Room” for communal cyber retreats, organized occasionally by the site. After entering the “Chapel,” a user can

navigate his or her way into the Café or Retreat Room through a “rooms” tab on the right. Even though the physical chat space does not appear to change, by moving into a new room, users can communicate with only other users in that room. Labeled chat rooms, therefore, create spaces designated for specific discussions between users deliberately involved in those discussions. The space within chat rooms can additionally reveal either scheduled or spontaneous interactions. For example, every Wednesday evening the “Chapel” opens for a prayer ritual, however the chat room of The Cybershaman Tribe constantly remains open to all discussions by any users.

While blogs, groups, and forums preserve posts over long periods of time, communication over chat rooms does not exhibit the same permanency. After members sign out of a chat room, they can no longer access previous conversations. Every time a user exits and then re-enters the chat room of i-church, for example, he or she encounters a blank chat space where all past conversations are erased and where only new conversations can take place. Furthermore, only members present at the time of the chat conversation can read and participate in it. Once, for example, I accidentally miscalculated the time difference between Eastern Standard Time in Connecticut (where I reside) and Greenwich Mean Time (the time zone in which the i-church prayer service takes place), and I entered the chat when members were engaging in small talk. Because I could not view the previous conversation, however, I could not tell if the service had already taken place or if I was early to the ritual. Only from the context clues of the future conversation — members thanking the prayer leader and saying their goodbyes — did I begin to realize that I had missed the worship service entirely. In this way, chat rooms become exclusive spaces for conversation and ritual, available only to those members present exactly when they occur. Both the
immediacy of communication as well as the apparent exclusivity of chat rooms creates a sense of closeness and community among those in attendance.

Each of these platforms—blogs, forums, groups, and chat rooms—enables communication and interaction between members through cyberspace. While blogs, forums, and groups allow members to craft slow and thoughtful responses, chat rooms facilitate immediacy in conversation and collective cyber rituals. The presence of all four outlets in one community provides the opportunity for individuals to come together and engage in the speed of communication most comfortable for them at the time most comfortable for them. Furthermore, each space supports a particular kind of communication, allowing members to build new relationships through multiple interactions. Gelfgren asserts, “Through the different web-based channels people share interests and experiences. For example, social networking through digital media is seen as one way to reach out, share stories, develop relationships, and thereby to build sustainable communities.”\footnote{Stefan Gelfgren, “Let there Be Digital Networks and God Will Provide Growth?” Comparing Aims and Hope of 19th Century and Post-Millennial Christianity,” in Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices and Futures, ed. Pauline Hope Cheong, Peter Fischer-Nielsen, Stefan Gelfgren, and Charles Ess (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2012), 238.} These “web-based channels,” of blogs, forums, groups, and chat, therefore, lead directly to the development of relationships and support systems through cyber religious communities.

Although spiritual growth depends largely on the personal goals, aims, and ideologies of individuals participating in cyber religious communities, websites’ structures also influence the spiritual practices and worldviews of these users. The examination of cyber communication will now turn to a more community-specific discussion. The rest of the chapter will consider these communication platforms in the
unique contexts of how i-church reflects Anglican Christianity and how The Cybershaman Tribe reflects neo-shamanism. It will look at the symbols and structures of the two websites in order to examine how each site reflects its counterpart in the physical world.

*Christianity and the i-church Institution: Authority and Structure*

Although i-church exists as an international network in cyberspace, the structures, language, and symbols of i-church reveal the community’s inherent connection with the Anglican Church and the Christian community in the physical world. Campbell argues, “As a cultured technology, the Internet shapes and is shaped by the culture in which it is being utilized.”139 For i-church, the “culture” – the language, ideology, and practices – of Anglican Christianity both influences and is influenced by the cyber religious community.

The structure of i-church suggests a deliberate modeling on the institution of The Church of England. Jacobs asserts, “Meaning has to be encoded in a way that is recognizable to the interpretative community for whom it is intended.”140 The authority and doctrine of the Anglican Church largely shapes its practices, rituals, and modes of belief. Individuals searching for a cyber Church of England community may expect these institutions online; the presence of these structures in i-church, therefore, may allow members to recognize i-church as a largely Anglican community. In his or her survey response, one i-church member living in Scotland shared, “i-church provides for me the link to my Church of England roots. It feels familiar.” This

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139 Campbell, “Making Space,” 313.
comment suggests that connections between i-church and physical Church of England churches can offer a sense of comfort for Anglican individuals engaging with the website. The response of this user, therefore, supports Campbell’s notion that the Internet “offers traditional religion a new place for believers to live out their religious convictions and extend their established rituals.”141 This member’s cyber religiosity and experience with i-church remain inherently connected to his or her religious convictions; i-church simply provides a new platform in which the individual can practice faith.

Through language, symbols, and structures informed by the Anglican Church, i-church translates the physical church into cyberspace, creating a sense of shared religious identity around the institution of the Church of England and crafting a framework through which members from across the globe can form relationships and support one another. The reflection of the Church of England institution in i-church can give the cyber community legitimacy, create a common culture, and establish a feeling of exclusivity, unity and closeness.

**Authority in the Structure of i-church**

The hierarchical structure of i-church mirrors that of the Church of England. In the Church of England, the ordained ministry holds the authority within the church, leads laypeople in their prayer and rituals, and watches over his or her flock. As in physical Anglican churches, a pastor, ordained by the Diocese of Oxford in the physical world, leads i-church. The authority of i-church, therefore, does not simply mirror that of the physical Church of England, but takes it on completely. Pam, the

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Priest in Charge, leads the i-church congregation in prayer in the same way that a pastor in a physical church would. Although other administrators lead Wednesday Worship from time to time, Pam regularly directs the service. Furthermore, when glitches spontaneously prevent other administrators from guiding a service, Pam steps in, without prior preparation. Pam also operates the site and overlooks members’ activity and interactions throughout the Courtyard – the message boards, chat rooms, and blogs of the site.

The presence of a Priest in Charge connects the cyber community to the greater Anglican Church while also establishing the hierarchy of i-church. The Diocese of Oxford, part of the wider Anglican Church, holds the power to ordain Pam, placing her authority under the umbrella of the Church of England. Pam’s title, however, also situates the members of i-church as laypeople who hold less power and authority than both her and, by extension, the institution of the Anglican Church. Her ordination unites the community as one body operating under the principles and ideology of the Church of England and gives users’ spiritual education a sense of a shared authority.

Members acknowledge the authority of the Priest in Charge as a positive characteristic of i-church. One individual attributes his or her feelings of closeness with the community to “the licensing of the priest-in-charge through the diocese.” This response implies that the authority of the Priest in Charge grants a certain legitimacy to i-church and also unites the community under a common leader and institution. Another i-church member similarly asserts, “Knowing the webpastor (sic) and her deputy in i-church are both ordained priests is similar to accepting the integrity of the teaching in a physical church. I know what is required for the training
of priests in the Anglican and Methodist churches.” For this user, the ordination of the pastor contributes to the “integrity” and authenticity of i-church. Furthermore, this member’s knowledge of physical ministry training influences his or her idea of cyber authority and legitimacy. This data supports the findings of Tim Hutchings, a sociologist of religion who also studied i-church, which report that the presence of an ordained Priest in Charge establishes a sense of “confidence” and legitimacy in i-church.\footnote{Tim Hutchings, “Creating Church Online: Networks and Collectives in Contemporary Christianity,” in Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices and Futures, ed. Pauline Hope Cheong, Peter Fischer-Nielsen, Stefan Gelfgren, and Charles Ess (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2012), 215.} In an interview he conducted, one user explained, “the knowledge that those leading are from a true Church such as the Church of England or another denomination in communion with it [is] invaluable.”\footnote{Ibid.} The use of the terms “true Church” again evokes the sense that Pam’s ordination by the Diocese of Oxford establishes authenticity in the i-church community.

The hierarchy of i-church becomes visible in the chat rooms of The Chapel and The Café. In these spaces one sees the usernames of online members as they log in to the chat space. Next to the username of each member appears a faceless cartoon of a human head and torso. These figures cannot be personalized in any way; the only distinction between figures is their color, which has been pre-established by the site moderators. Pam is red, other site moderators are blue, and laypeople are green. While all members can engage in communication openly, the colors remind users of their positions within both i-church and The Church of England. Much like how pews and vestments in a physical church mark the distinction between the congregation and the priest at the altar, these colors designate place and status within
the church. As the only red figure in the sea of green congregation members, Pam commands a sense of importance as the singular leader. Even in a congregation with one or two blue figures, the singularity of Pam’s red marks her as the highest ruler of the service, above not only the laymen, but also the limited number of non-clergy administrators.

These distinctions between roles in the church dictate a sense of reverence and respect for the pastor behind the screen as they would in a physical church. One i-church member asserted that “the guidance from the priest” and “the discipleship experience” keep him or her coming back to i-church. This member acknowledges both the authority of the Priest in Charge and the experience of learning under her leadership as attributes of i-church that maintain his or her presence in the community. This user not only appreciates the ordination of the Priest in Charge for the sense of legitimacy, but also for the learning-based relationship he or she can have with her and the support he or she receives from that relationship.

Beyond its ministry, the structure of i-church rituals also reflects the institution of the Church of England. Prayer services take place in i-church every Wednesday in the “Chapel.” As in a physical church, the Chapel of i-church is a (chat) room designated specifically for prayer. As previously described, the chat room is separated from the rest of i-church—from its information resources as well as its forum and blogs—creating a sacred space in which the worship of God and Christ can take place. The Chapel chat room is also separated from the “Café” chat room, a space where individuals can gather to discuss any matters, both religious and secular, in an informal manner. The separation of the Chapel from the secular world reflects the
separation of a chapel building from the secular buildings and spaces of the physical world.

i-church also marks off prayer space from secular space when the prayer leader types the emoticon symbol of a cross before the worship service begins and after its conclusion. Before and after the prayer leader types this symbol, members discuss secular matters—how they feel that evening or if they have any plans for the night, for example. Once the prayer leader types the cross symbol, worship begins and members refrain from typing unless the prayer leader signals them to do so. The cross serves as a visible, Christian symbol of Christ’s salvation of the world’s sins. Upon entering a physical church, one oftentimes notices an abundance of crosses not necessarily present in the secular space outside of the church. Similarly, with the symbol of the cross, prayer space becomes marked as separate from secular space. In this way, i-church uses the same structures and spaces as the physical Anglican Church, but instead translates them into the cyber world.

In addition to taking place in the Chapel, the nature of i-church’s Wednesday Worship ritual also reflects that of a physical Anglican Church service. The rules for behavior in the prayer service echo those implicit in physical church. For example, the “New Members Guide on Worship Services” thread states, “You are very welcome to join us, even if you’re a little late just come along and join us quietly, when you enter the chat room.”144 The language of this statement reflects that of a physical church, where if a person enters a service late, he or she should remain quiet and respectful and avoid speaking or drawing attention to his or herself. This etiquette

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does not disappear in cyberspace; although everyone can type in the chat room, the protocol to enter “quietly,” without typing, remains expected.

As in the physical world, the structure of the worship ritual also places authority in the hands of the prayer leader, to whom the congregation shows reverence. In a physical church, the priest stands upon the altar and leads the service. As he or she recites a prepared liturgy, the congregation remains quiet. Similarly, either Pam or another site administrator leads each i-church worship service, and once the service has begun, no other members speak unless asked to do so. The congregation respects the leader’s authority, listens to his or her words, and thanks him or her the guidance in worship at the end of the service.

Expectations for worship in the i-church Chapel reflect those of an evening prayer service in the physical Church of England. Much like how a priest in a physical church reads a prayer word by word, so too do i-church prayer leaders type each line one at a time. In the many weeks I attended i-church Wednesday worship, never did I encounter a prayer leader who typed or pasted an entire prayer into a text box and then pressed, “send.” Instead, lines of prayers appear one after another in the chat room as separate messages. Members follow the pace of the leader who offers the prayer line by line. Moreover, a time lag remains between prayer verses. After the leader has “sent” one line of text, a “speak” bubble appears next to his or her name as he enters a new message – new prayer verses. After members have read the previous line, they wait silently for the leader to finish typing the next. In a physical prayer service, the congregation similarly follows the pace of the pastor, only able to reflect on the prayer as he or she voices it aloud.
Additionally, i-church prayer leaders construct their services in a manner similar to Church of England evening prayer services, which “consist of psalms, Bible readings, and prayers; and may include a sermon. They may be with or without music.”\textsuperscript{145} As one i-church member explains, “Services at i-church are more like physical church with liturgy, clips and videos.” While the prayers change each week, Jennifer, the site moderator and a regular prayer leader, constructs her services along these lines. One can expect a service lead by Jennifer to include liturgy, perhaps a prayer from outside of the Bible, call and response passages, and time for personal petitions of prayer.

On October 30, 2013, for example, Jennifer began with a prayer that thanked God for autumn and the changing of seasons.\textsuperscript{146} This prayer included multiple call and response moments—moments of “Amen,” “Thank you,” and “Please forgive us.”\textsuperscript{147} Verses of call and response function in i-church as they do in physical church; the prayer leader recites a line and signals to the congregation to repeat that line. Whereas in a physical church service, the congregation can learn to repeat the line from the prayer book or the raised arm of the pastor, in cyberspace an asterisk indicates prayer response. Sometimes the pastor informs lay members about what an asterisk means and sometimes members discover this rule in the “New Member’s Guide on Worship Services.”\textsuperscript{148} Members, however, can also learn how to respond to an asterisk by following the lead of the rest of the congregation.

\textsuperscript{146} “Wednesday Worship,” i-church, The Chapel, October 30, 2013.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid.
Due to technical difficulties, Pam stepped in and continued the service, offering prayer petitions for different groups of people such as Church ministry, the homeless, and Christians around the world.\textsuperscript{149} The service ended with a call to collectively recite the Lord’s Prayer.\textsuperscript{150} Although it was not involved in this event, music can accompany i-church prayer just as it can accompany physical church services. If the prayer leader wishes to use music, he or she posts a video or audio file in the “Chapel and Chat” message board for members to play on their respective computers during the service.\textsuperscript{151} Music provides an opportunity for members from across the globe to unite by listening to the same song at the same time in an i-church service. Anglican worship services similarly employ all of these methods of prayer. Moreover, like physical churches, i-church ritualizes and schedules these prayer services weekly.

By reflecting and adhering to the structures of the physical Church of England, i-church constructs a familiar space for Anglican users and a space full of learning resources for new members to the Anglican Church community. This adherence to Anglican structures and practices, as well as the leadership of an ordained priest, gives i-church a sense of legitimacy, rooted in its connection to the established and respected body of Christian faith. One i-church member explains that “sermons, reflections, meetings every week for prayer and fellowship” contribute to his or her sense of closeness with the community. The adherence to these structures suggests that communication and ritual in i-church, therefore, not only take place in

\textsuperscript{149} “Wednesday Worship,” i-church, The Chapel, October 30, 2013.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid.
message boards or chat rooms on the Internet, but also become avenues for members
to build relationships and unite in shared faith and reverence to a common authority.

*Christianity and the i-church Institution: Language*

While the structure of i-church creates a space for collective faith that reflects the
Church of England, the communication taking place through the site shapes the
relationships between members and the sense of support that permeates the
community. According to Heidi Campbell, “communication is at the basis of online
community.”\(^{152}\) In order to build cyber community, therefore, the question becomes
how to craft communication in cyberspace. O’Leary articulates, “The fundamental
problem of religious communication is how best to represent and mediate the
sacred.”\(^{153}\) For religious discourse, therefore, how to express the sacred becomes an
enormous question. As Karaflogka argues, “Every expression of human devoutness …
is inevitably mediated expression which comes through a variety of means of
communication.”\(^{154}\) Appropriate methods of communication remain specific to the
expression intended and voiced by the particular member.

This question regarding religious discourse becomes augmented in the context of
cyberspace, stripped of physical cues and gestures; communication on the Internet is
explicitly mediated by text and symbols. One i-church member identifies mediation
by text as a key difference between i-church and physical church: “The services in i-
church all take place in text only.” How, then, can members properly reflect devotion
to the Church of England through cyber language and symbols? This section looks at

\(^{152}\) Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online*, 127.

\(^{153}\) O’Leary, “Cyberspace as Sacred Space,” 41.

\(^{154}\) Karaflogka, “Religious Discourse and Cyberspace,” 283.
how language is mediated on the Internet to form a supportive religious community. The use of Christian language marks i-church as a religious space inhabited by members who share reverence to the same Christian God. i-church’s traditional language, therefore, forms a foundation for unity and community in a shared religious tradition.

The language used to label the different (cyber) spaces of i-church reflects the Christian tradition and attributes unity and strength to the community. For example, the home page of i-church is not called “Home” but rather “The Gatehouse.” The term “gatehouse” means, “A fortified structure built over the gateway to a city or castle.” The term gatehouse therefore both suggests a space of strength and unity and also implies the presence of a community beyond that structure and protected by its strength. One can infer that the fortitude and protection implied by i-church is that of a shared commitment to and love for Jesus Christ. By clicking any links on “The Gatehouse” one enters the world of this strong community of support.

Explicit religious language also accompanies this implicit language. The chat room in which weekly prayer takes place is not simply labeled “Chat” or “The Chat Room”; instead, i-church calls the prayer space, “The Chapel.” A chapel, by definition, is “a small building for Christian worship, typically one attached to an institution or private house.” The use of the word “chapel,” therefore, indicates a direct connection with Christianity and establishes the space of i-church as an explicitly Christian one. By labeling i-church space with Christian language, i-church

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unites the community through a common faith tradition, commitment, and belief. This language also suggests to Christian users what kind of ritual they might find by clicking the “Chapel” link. In these ways, language may simultaneously alienate non-Christian visitors who do not understand the terms or to whom the terms do not appeal, drawing community boundaries in cyber space.

The terms “The Gatehouse” and “The Chapel,” furthermore, reveal physical language. A gatehouse and a chapel are physical spaces for fortification and prayer, respectively. By connecting these online spaces to physical structures in the world, i-church establishes a connection to traditional Christian structures, giving the site a sense of religious history, legitimacy, and familiarity for Christian users.

Language also becomes appropriated by i-church in a way specific to the cyber religious community. While the terms “chapel” and “gatehouse” provide a general idea of what visitors can find in these cyber spaces, the terms take on meanings more specific to the cyber community; in the context of i-church, the terms “gatehouse” and “chapel” do not simply mean “a fortified space” and a “space for Christian prayer,” respectively. In i-church, the term “gatehouse” adopts “homepage” as one of its definitions, since the homepage of the site is called “The Gatehouse.” Furthermore, on the “What is i-church?” page, i-church defines “The Gatehouse” explicitly as “information and resources about Christianity for everyone to use.”157 “The Gatehouse” becomes not only a place of strength, but also a web page where members can access all of the site’s resources. By visiting “The Gatehouse,” members visit this specific web page, not any fortified gateway.

In the context of i-church, “The Chapel” not only means a small space for Christian prayer, but also becomes defined by its presence as the website’s chat room. i-church, in fact, defines “The Chapel” as “a chat room where you are welcome to join in our live services and discussions.”\textsuperscript{158} For a newcomer to i-church, the terms “gatehouse” and “chapel” appear vague and somewhat confusing. Even if they understand the dictionary definitions and the Christian contexts of the terms, they have not learned the i-church-specific definitions and they cannot know what exactly occurs beyond the links. In this way, through shared experience with i-church, members become bonded together in a joint understanding of language.

The use of Christian faith language also appears within the i-church prayer ritual. Most of the i-church prayer services I visited in this study included a liturgy from the Bible. The liturgy recited changed each week; for example, on October 23\textsuperscript{rd}, 2013, Pam recited Isaiah, 61:10-11\textsuperscript{159} but on December 4, 2013, another administrator delivered both Psalm 139:2-3 and Mark 13:35.\textsuperscript{160} Although the prayers are typed, not spoken aloud as they would be in a physical prayer service, the language from the Bible verse is retained in both the cyber and the physical ritual. This maintenance of liturgical language in prayer, therefore invokes the same meaning both in cyberspace and physical space while also establishing a connection with the larger Christian world through The Bible.

Furthermore, in attributing these verses to specific sections of The Bible, i-church appears to assume a certain level of member familiarity with the Christian Bible, its books, and the language associated with the verses. This assumption appears most

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{159} “Wednesday Worship,” i-church, The Chapel, October 23, 2013.
\textsuperscript{160} “Wednesday Worship,” i-church, The Chapel, December 4, 2013.
clearly in prayer leaders’ suggestion that all members recite “The Lord’s Prayer” in their own time.  

161 The prayer leader announces, “Please say [the Lord’s prayer] in your own preferred version and in your own time, typing ‘Amen’ when you finish.”

This suggestion implies that all members are familiar with a version of “The Lord’s Prayer” and the words necessary to recite it. The silence in the chat room for several seconds after the request, followed by the typed “Amens” of members indicate that members are indeed familiar with the Lord’s Prayer and do have preferred versions.

In order to voice an “Amen” after the liturgy, members must know the words to the prayer and recognize the meaning and the connotations of “Father,” “Heaven,” and “Word” in the prayer, for example. By reciting prayers directly from the Christian Bible, i-church creates a ritual with which Christian participants can feel comfortable and united in a common religious ideology, tradition and history. Shared faith and tradition construct a sense of community among members, separated with language from those outside of the community.

The use of Christian language in i-church also takes the form of call and response and ritual declarations of worship. Physical worship uses call and response to incite congregation members to call out declarations of faith in the Christian God in unison. In Wednesday worship, prayer leaders similarly choose prayers, both from The Bible and otherwise, that ask parishioners to affirm the Word of the Lord or to rejoice in His goodness by proclaiming, “O Lord hear my voice,” “Thanks be to God,” or “Amen.” After the prayer leader types a line preceded by an asterisk, members repeat it, one by one, and each response shows up after the next in the chat room space.

While in cyber worship, the declarations take place through text rather than by voice, the words expressed remain the same; even though these replies remain separated by usernames in the chat room, they flood the space at the same time and always reveal the same text, visually manifesting member unity in faith. The physical act of typing the response furthermore suggests user affirmation of and active participation in the prayer. Just as in a physical church service, declarations of faith in i-church join members together in prayer and belief, creating an exclusive community separated from all others who do not share this common devotion.

*Christianity and the i-church Institution: Symbols and Emoticons*

Images and symbols in i-church also reflect the symbols of the Church of England and the greater Christian community. Campbell explains how members of cyber communities value “sharing common boundaries and symbols” in their online community experiences.¹⁶³ i-church community members share symbols both reflective of the larger Christian community and uniquely specific to the i-church community.

Individuals participating in online spaces aim to overcome the absence of emotion-conveying nonverbal cues by using visual elements and symbols in their conversations.¹⁶⁴ Campbell defines emoticons as “punctuation meant to represent human gestures and facial expressions.”¹⁶⁵ Emoticons function to overcome the difficulties of expressing emotion in cyberspace by providing representations of emotions. Today, emoticons not only take the shape of punctuation but also of

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¹⁶³ Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online*, 44.
¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 115.
¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 3.
cartoon images and symbols that represent key emotions and also ideas. The symbolism of emoticons can be used “to more fully express common religious ideas and to link individuals to shared beliefs or values.”\textsuperscript{166} i-church specifically uses the emoticon of the candle and the cross to participate in Christian piety.

The candle emoticon pervades the communication spaces of i-church. This small cartoon candle remains regularly present in the “Prayer” message board. The Priest in Charge, Pam, began a thread on this board entitled, “Light a candle.”\textsuperscript{167} Pam describes posting a candle as “a symbol of … prayers.”\textsuperscript{168} On this thread, members post small candle emoticons, the flames of which flicker with animation, imitating the flickering of a physical flame. Some users post candles without any text, while other members express specific prayer intentions along with the candle. Bible verses accompany the candles of other individuals. The use of language with the candle reveals how text and symbols operate together through i-church to create communication bound up in emotion and symbolic meaning. The use of these symbols reflects Christian tradition and symbolism. The symbolic candle emoticons imitate the physical candles lit in physical church spaces as acts of prayer. Although the candles of i-church do not take the tangible, three-dimensional form of physical church candles, both the image of the symbol and its implied intention in the Christian tradition are retained in the emoticon.

\textsuperscript{166} Ibid, 116.
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid.
i-church members not only use the symbol of the candle for their own prayer petitions, but they also use it to show support for the intentions of other members. Within the “Prayer” message board, hundreds of members type personal prayers. While some individuals explain the struggles or accomplishments for which they pray, other members write the name of a loved one, and others simply post a candle of their own. On each of these threads, other members respond to the prayer petition with candle symbols. The “Light a candle” thread currently has 19 pages, 1407 views and 465 replies while the Prayer message board as a whole has 12 pages and 277 topics for prayer petitions. These figures indicate that prayer support remains a significant part of the i-church website and community.

i-church members also use the emoticon symbol of a candle in a manner specific to the cyber community. In i-church, members use the candle emoticon to represent prayers both for their own concerns and for the petitions of other members. In a physical church, visitors typically light one or two candles for their personal intentions, often before or after the worship service. In i-church Chapel, however, members light candles during the prayer service and, rather than lighting only a few, they respond to every prayer petition by every member with a candle. In i-church specifically, responding with a candle reveals community support for other members’ prayers, whereas in a physical church, prayer petitions are often followed by silence (as the congregation prays quietly) or calls of “Amen” or “Lord, hear our prayer!” In this way, the candle emoticon takes on the new meaning of “support” in i-church, distinct from The Church of England and specific to the cyber community.

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The candle emoticon furthermore serves as a specifically visual symbol of support with i-church. After each member types a personal prayer petition, multiple candle emoticons instantly appear. The candles follow immediately after each prayer petition, associating them directly with the specific request. As candle emoticons flood message board threads, members visually witness the support of the community as it adopts their individual prayers as their own. The candle in the space of the i-church thereby provides immediate communal support for the personal concerns of individual members.

The use of the candle emoticon in the permanent space of i-church message boards, furthermore, allows struggling members to return to the board and re-experience the community support days, weeks, months, or even years after creating the post first. In fact, one can witness prayers in the “Prayer” message board from as far back as 2008.170 One i-church member suggest that this constant sense of community support contributes to his or her feelings of closeness with i-church: “Because we have forums, people can respond to each other better over time – if I post a prayer request, people might respond to it over several days and will come back and ask me how things are going.” Prayer support, through both candles and texts, therefore, remains constant. Candles in physical church spaces are fleeting and burn down over time. The candle emoticon in i-church, therefore, begins to signify not only community support, but also permanent and visible support, available to all members. As this symbol takes on new meanings, members of i-church become unified in their understanding and use of the emoticon candle not only as a symbol of prayer but also of community care, understanding, and empathy.

i-church members also use the emoticon of a cross to convey spiritual devotion and faith. Members employ the emoticon cross in multiple ways: sometimes individuals post a cross along with a prayer intention and other times a prayer leader uses the emoticon to mark the chat space for prayer in the Chapel, for example. The cross emoticon takes the shape of a traditional Christian symbol, the universal Christian cross that represents both Jesus’ “suffering and defeat but also the triumph and salvation.” The yellow color of the cross, furthermore, seems to illustrate the holiness of the symbol and perhaps draw a connection to Jesus as the “light of the world.” The use of the symbol of the cross, although in the form of an emoticon, establishes i-church as a Christian space and allows members to unite in common Christian symbolism and faith in Jesus Christ. Upon entering a physical Christian church, one observes crosses and crucifixes that can adorn walls, pews, ceilings, and any other space in the church. This abundance of crosses marks off the church from the secular world and spaces of other religious traditions, where space remains largely unmarked by Christianity.

So too, in i-church, one finds an abundance of crosses. Prayer leaders often mark off the worship space in the chat room by posting a cross emoticon at the beginning and the end of the sermon. By marking off space with this religious symbol in cyberspace, Christians from across the globe can join together in a shared understanding and reverence of the cross and its significance as a reminder of Jesus’

172 John 8:12 NRSV.
crucifixion, love, and salvation. Bringing the symbol of the cross into cyberspace allows members to connect not only with other members in joint Christian faith but also with the larger network of global Christianity. The history of this symbol transcends space, time, and even technology, allowing members to feel connected with more individuals than ever before.

The cross emoticon also takes on new symbolic meaning within the community of i-church. When this symbol appears before the service, regular i-church members understand the following space not only as a Christian space, but also as one reserved for prayer alone. When the leader sends the emoticon at the end of the service, members know that the service has concluded and that they can thank the leader and have secular discussions. The new significance attached to the cross as marking the beginning and end of the prayer ritual adopts the symbol as one specific to i-church and its members. Users become unified and organized not only in their common connection to the Church of England and Christianity, but also in the distinctive symbols of the i-church community. Furthermore, this symbol in the i-church Chapel directly facilitates the worship ritual, allowing members to join together in prayer and to find spiritual support and camaraderie with one another.

**Spiritual Autonomy and The Cybershaman Tribe: Structuring Spiritual Subjectivity**

Unlike i-church, The Cybershaman Tribe does not represent a traditional, established institution. For this community, the Internet instead provides a web space reflective of and supportive of cybershamanic New Age practice. According to Jakobsen, “There is no institution in which New Agers gather, there is no single
leader who can be the overall organizer and creator of rituals, there is no umbrella organisation (sic).”\textsuperscript{173} Jakobsen reveals how neo-shamanism fits into the scheme of New Age spirituality: “[in neo-shamanism] the individual can develop his or her shamanic skills alone.”\textsuperscript{174} Neo-shamanism, therefore, exists as a subjective affair in which an individual can build his or her spirituality autonomously. According to Martínková, moreover, “there is no technoshamanic, cybershamanic, not even shamanic ‘institution,’ neither central nor local.”\textsuperscript{175} Not only does neo-shamanism allow for spiritual subjectivity, but Cybershamanism, specifically, also exists as a tradition that lacks a central authority.

Partridge similarly describes cyberspace as having an “anarchic dimension”; it exists as a realm where “hierarchies and religious authorities are subverted.”\textsuperscript{176} This anarchic nature of the Internet therefore can provide an appropriate venue for Cybershamanism, made of members “journeying alone” in spirituality, to both dwell and flourish.\textsuperscript{177} The Internet presents a democratic space in which individuals can express their voices equally and establish personal spiritualities built on subjective experiences. The URL of http://cybershaman.ning.com/ specifically establishes a space in the Internet through which cybershamans can pursue their individual intentions. Cyberspace establishes appropriate platforms for members of The Cybershaman Tribe to practice their spirituality subjectively, in manners reflective of New Age and neo-shamanism alike.

\textsuperscript{173} Jakobsen, \textit{Shamanism}, 151-152.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid, 157.
\textsuperscript{175} Martínková, “Computer Mediated Religious Life,” 44.
\textsuperscript{176} Partridge, \textit{Re-enchantment}, 141.
\textsuperscript{177} Martínková, “Computer Mediated Religious Life,” 50.
The Cybershaman Tribe does not limit its membership to only individuals who identify as cybershamans. Instead, users from a variety of faiths and spiritual practices communicate through the site. For example, the participant in my voluntary survey described his or her religious upbringing as “fundy,” or Christian Fundamentalist. However, when asked, “Do you consider yourself a cyber-shaman? How do you refer to yourself/identify in regards to your spirituality?” this six-year participant replied: “Corellian wiccan buddist (sic). Adept. Teacher (meaning lifelong student thats (sic) compelled to share so to learn perspectives on everything). Hermit card (on the return, not ascent).” Members from diverse traditions, therefore, can participate in The Cybershaman Tribe and each individual need not commit to only one religion. This user, for example, incorporates Buddhism, Wicca, and Tarot into his or her religious practice. Moreover, this member describes Cybershaman as a “small aspect of supplementary paradigm exploration,” or just one practice in a larger, personal spiritual journey. This diversity in tradition reflects the eclecticism, individuality, and “anarchy” of cybershamanism and the New Age movement and even the nature of traditional shamanism, which “generally … coexists with other forms of magic and religion.”

While i-church constructs itself in a way imitative of the Church of England, the nature of the Internet provides a space appropriate for the autonomy of neo-shamanism, the New Age, and The Cybershaman Tribe. The Internet provides a democratic arena in which individual voices can join together openly and equally. Individuals can form a community without the pressures of adhering to an authority.

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or a hierarchy unreflective of their personal spiritual practice. In the “About CS” section of The Cybershaman Tribe, Ernie, the creator, explains that in using Causal Engineering in spiritual practice, “It is supremely important that ‘YOU’ the user be the person in charge and that it is as much as possible ‘on your terms.’” Ernie specifically promotes subjective spiritual practice with Cybershaman, describing user control as vital to the practice. His words dismiss the need for authority and promote user autonomy in a way reflective of New Age spirituality and neo-shamanism.

Beyond its absence of a traditional authority, the Internet’s ability to give way to a variety of voices and to provide spaces for individual creation makes cyberspace and The Cybershaman Tribe appropriate venues for the practice of New Age cybershamanism. As described at the beginning of this chapter, through the different platforms of blogs, forums, groups and chat, members of The Cybershaman Tribe can write individual messages asking for advice on the topic of their choice, offering advice to other users, and sharing media either to rejoice in successful practice or to help others gain spiritual success. David Bell defines cyberspace as cultural: “made from people, machines and stories in everyday life.” In order to be shaped by these voices, therefore, cyberspace must provide an outlet for them to be heard.

This idea that the voices and experiences of individuals from around the globe shape cyberspace appears vividly in The Cybershaman Tribe. Ernie describes: “You can really use [the Cybershaman Tribe] in your own way … Each person can create

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their own virtual space.”¹⁸¹ Not only does the Internet allow members to create personal spaces, but also the creator of The Cybershaman Tribe specifically intends the website to function on an individual level in the lives of its members. Moreover, through the creation of a post, any member can express his or her thoughts on the topic, in the language, and with the media of his or her choice. Members learn from one another and reflect on their personal experiences. Should a user feel intrigued by Breath Work or meditation, she can join the Cybershaman Tribe group, “Breath Work,” however, should she not wish to engage in this practice, she can choose to spend her time learning about the “therapeutic” “Solfeggio Frequencies” of the Cybershaman program.¹⁸² By providing an eclectic mix of ideas, practices, groups, and discussions, the Internet allows the “Subjectivity” characteristic of the New Age to be readily accessible and constantly present.¹⁸³ The method of and space for spiritual practice become choices for the spiritual practitioner, rather than dogma decreed by a higher institution or authority.

**Spiritual Autonomy and The Cybershaman Tribe: Time**

The accessibility of The Cybershaman Tribe lends to autonomous and subjective spiritual practice reflective of neo-shamanism. Individuals can participate in the Cybershaman Tribe website at all hours of the day, regardless of their geographic locations in the world. The site and its message boards, blogs, groups, and chat features can be accessed when a member most needs them: immediately when he or

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she has a problem either with the Cybershaman software or his or her spiritual practice, when most convenient in his or her schedule, or constantly throughout the day and night. The Internet and The Cybershaman Tribe, therefore, not only collapse space in regards to geographical distance, but also enable the development of a site impervious to time and the difficulties of busy schedules, complex mental states, and geographic time differences. Spiritual practice and the search for answers and advice become directly the practitioner’s responsibility and not subject to the hours designated by a particular institution or ritual.

Furthermore, not only can members post and share their difficulties or successes on their own schedules, but they can also respond to other members at personally convenient times. In the venues of message boards, blogs, and groups, users can spend time crafting careful responses or, if they do not have an immediate answer, they can respond in the future. In this way, the sharing of ideas and experiences takes place throughout the night and over weeks and months. Questions become continuous opportunities for personal conversations between members and reflections on the views of others, rather than inquiries resolved quickly by an answer from an authority or doctrine.

Practice with the Cybershaman Causal Engineering Interface can also take place at any time of the day. Each individual member can program his or her Cybershaman interface to either run for a specified length of time, or to run continuously.\(^\text{184}\) Choosing the continuous option means that the program will run the intention indefinitely, until the user manually clicks the button to end the session. In fact, individuals can keep the Cybershaman program running throughout the entire

day if they desire. One member from the United States explains that he or she keeps the Cybershaman program running at home while he or she is away at work.\footnote{Jason Wiggins, “How to handle a pest,” \textit{The Cybershaman Tribe}, February 7, 2012, accessed January 26, 2014, http://cybershaman.ning.com/forum/topics/how-to-handle-a-pest?commentId=2808075%3AComment%3A36431.} Because the program serves as a “shaman” of sorts, mediating the spiritual and physical worlds and taking on the process of meditation for the user, so long as the user focuses energy towards and meditates on his or her intention when he or she presses the “send” button and begins the session, the program will channel energy towards the user’s intention as long as he or she pleases. Even while participating in secular activities such as work, individuals can engage in cybershamanic practice and channel energy toward their intentions.

Much like with the interface, members can access The Cybershaman Tribe all day long in spite of time zones and chaotic schedules. Distinctions between secular and spiritual life, therefore, begin to blur. In the Cybershaman Tribe, time dedicated to spiritual ritual is not designated by an institution or isolated from the secular world. In this way, not only space, but also time becomes free from institutional authority and members can instead choose to engage in spiritual practice and conversation at personally convenient times.

\textit{Spiritual Autonomy and The Cybershaman Tribe: Organizing Ritual}

The neo-shamanic focus on subjective spiritual practice, meditation, and ritual becomes reinforced by the lack of designated, institutionalized, and regular ritual in The Cybershaman Tribe. In i-church, ritual worship takes place every week. The space of The Cybershaman Tribe, on the other hand, does not host a formal,
regularly coordinated ritual. The chat room, which on i-church opens for chat and ritual only at specific hours, remains open at all times on The Cybershaman Tribe. Whereas i-church uses the chat room for its weekly worship, however, the chat room of The Cybershaman tribe does not appear to function as a space for members to meet as a group at a chosen time. Instead, the chat room serves as a space where members who happen to be online at the same time, by circumstance of their individual schedules, can meet and talk as a group should they desire to do so.

Unlike with i-church, where members must click the “Chapel” link to join the chat room, in The Cybershaman Tribe users need not specifically log in to the chat room for a given ritual. Instead, when a member logs in to The Cybershaman Tribe website, he or she immediately becomes present in the chat room. In this way, entering the chat space does not become an intentional search for chat but rather a product of logging into The Cybershaman Tribe website at a personally convenient or appropriate time.

Furthermore, speaking with members in the chat room becomes a conscious decision in The Cybershaman Tribe. When a member enters the i-church chat room, other members immediately acknowledge and greet him or her with a “hello” or “welcome”—in fact, even the chat room says, “Welcome!” in an automated voice. Because members log in to the i-church chat room at designated ritual times, members seem to assume that the individuals entering the room wish to communicate with and engage with the rest of the community immediately and directly. On The Cybershaman Tribe, individuals can speak with others over chat should they wish, but engagement with other members in the chat room never appears expected. For example, in the many hours I have personally spent logged into The Cybershaman
Tribe website, not one member has approached me over chat or welcomed me into the space, whereas nearly every user present in the i-church Chapel or Café has offered me a “Hello” when I log in.

Furthermore, The Cybershaman Tribe’s attempts to create regular, unified rituals have run into significant difficulties. For example, one user created the event, “Good Luck in General,” aimed at harnessing energy by setting up weekly, simultaneous group Cybershaman sessions for collective prosperity.\(^\text{186}\) He or she discusses setting up group intentions for the weeks ahead and keeping up with updates on the event web page.\(^\text{187}\) The user explains, “I thought this week let's each of us set the intention for your own self. Next week we'll look at the most beneficial way to come together as a group to help each other.”\(^\text{188}\) He or she exhibits a desire for a regular group ritual not only in the present, but also one that continues in the future. Other members appear excited about the prospect of a regular group Cybershaman ritual. One user writes, “Count me in! Thanks! I will do a little thing on my end for the current group signed up”\(^\text{189}\) and a second person affirms, “Yes this sounds very constructive and positive.”\(^\text{190}\) Overall, eleven members write publicly that they would

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like to participate in or are thankful for the invitation to the ritual and thirty-nine members confirmed that they would “attend” the event.\footnote{191}{Conley, “Good Luck in General,” March 21, 2010.}

Although the group leader refers to the weeks ahead and although multiple members express their desires to participate, the conversation only lasts for four days. In fact, as explained in this work’s Introduction, this desire for a group intention devolved from an attempt to run the Cybershaman Interface at the exact same time of day, to a session that took place during the same week but at times individually convenient for each member.\footnote{192}{N, “How about a group Cybershaman session booster trend?”} One individual writes on the event page, “How did this become so complicated?”\footnote{193}{Mike Conner, “Good Luck in General,” The Cybershaman Tribe, March 23, 2010, accessed January 26, 2014, http://cybershaman.ning.com/events/good-luck-in-general?id=2808075%3AEvent%3A3996&page=1#comments.} This sense of disorganization suggests the lack of a central authority to designate a ritualized schedule for all members to follow. The inability to set up a regularly scheduled ritual suggests that The Cybershaman Tribe and the Cybershaman program function primarily as individual-focused spaces for spiritual practice, reflective of the New Age and neo-shamanic focus on subjectivity.

**Spiritual Autonomy and The Cybershaman Tribe: Sharing Media**

Media can also be used in Cybershaman and The Cybershaman Tribe in a way that allows for a subjective spiritual experience. The Cybershaman Tribe offers spaces for members to post videos and images that help them with their Cybershaman, meditation, or trance experience, for example. A space entitled, “Member Videos” occupies part of the “Member Area” of the website.\footnote{194}{“Member Area,” The Cybershaman Tribe, accessed April 1, 2014.} Here, all
members of The Cybershaman Tribe can view videos posted by other members and contribute videos of their own.

This space includes how-to videos on spiritual equipment, such as one video entitled, “Bashar Explains How the Free Energy Space-Time Antenna Works,” which visually provides an image of the Free Energy Space-Time Antenna. Audio-wise, this video offers an interview with the extra-terrestrial being, Bashar. The interviewer describes the Antenna, how it was constructed, and next asks Bashar how it functions. Bashar’s voice seems to change, sometimes sounding Middle-Eastern in origin, other times sounding American, but always quite robotic. Bashar begins to describe how the antenna amplifies and transforms an electric current into electronic energy that can be tapped and used for spiritual practice.

Other videos are directed specifically at teaching members about how to use the Cybershaman Interface, such as “Cybershaman 101.” This video both describes and visually navigates the process of downloading the free version of Cybershaman and of constructing a personal Cybershaman interface. It includes instructions about how to input intentions, targets, tones, images, and animation, and how to set the frequency and duration of the running program.

Additional videos provide music and visuals that assist with meditation and that can be incorporated as tones in the Cybershaman Interface, such as “The Orb –

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195 Ibid.
196 Ibid.
197 Ibid.
198 Ibid.
Blue Room.” Sound-wise, this video provides techno music – first slow and then more upbeat and poppy—overlaid with different sound effects such as a bubble popping sound, a sand sound, revving sounds, and laser sounds. Visually, this video begins with an empty, black space with little dots of light, like stars, permeating the darkness. The space slowly transforms into different colors and shapes, somewhat like a strobe light. Images of dolphins most frequently float through the space but eagles, astronauts, and seals also appear. In just over three years, members from across the globe have posted two hundred forty-one videos in the “Member Videos” space, all extremely different in nature.

The “Member Photos & Art” page functions similarly to the “Member Videos” page, also enabling members to share media. The images of this space can range from a picture of a healing crystal, to a photograph of different stars, constellations, and nebulas, to symbols of the pentacles of Venus, and to a picture of a Hawaiian lei. Much like the videos, these images allow users to share images they have used in their individual Cybershaman sessions and to help others choose images for their personal practices of Causal Engineering.

These media are not isolated only in individual “Members’” profiles, but can also be incorporated in group, blog, and forum posts, as well as in private messaging. For example, in the discussion “PEOPLE INTERESTED IN BEING INCLUDED IN THE HO’OPONOPONO HEALING ENERGIES” in the Group “Psionic

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203 Ibid.
Playground,” one user provides six images (symbols) that he or she says members can use to run the joint intention of forgiveness. Members can involve media in all forms of communication through The Cybershaman Tribe and constantly access new videos and spiritual guides through a variety of sources. Members can share media and find unity in their use of the same images and videos in spiritual practice, promoting a sense of community and support. The media that these spaces offer give members choices and the power to decide with their own minds and their own intentions which images and videos best support their spiritual journeys. The “Members Videos” and the “Members Photos & Art” areas therefore function like a marketplace, where members can pick and choose from an assortment of spiritual symbols and practices.

**Spiritual Autonomy and The Cybershaman Tribe: Using Cybershaman Subjectively**

The customized nature of each member’s Cybershaman Interface reflects strongly the subjective focus of New Age spirituality and neo-shamanism. Although all members utilize the same Cybershaman program, the way each member interacts with and designs his or her Cybershaman interface remains highly personal. In his response to a person trying to get his or her ex-lover back, Ernie explains that one’s personal circumstances influence the “settings” – intentions, frequencies, and images.

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– of his Cybershaman program. Without knowing these circumstances, others cannot assist in choosing those settings.

Cybershaman interfaces therefore become subjective spaces for cybershamanic practice in both their focus on individualized intentions and in the personalized use of tones and images. In the Cybershaman Manual, for example, Ernie, refers to the inherently “very personal nature of the software” and explains that while certain techniques might have worked for him, other ones may “far better fit your personality and emotional disposition.” The settings must personally and accurately reflect the goals and desires of the specific community member in order to achieve the desired result. While other members can offer suggestions, they cannot truly know what a user’s hopes and fears deeply mean to her and what images captivate and resonate with those desires. The decision of which settings to use becomes a personal choice, distinctive from the instructions of any institution or authority. Furthermore, even if members decide to run Cybershaman at the same time with a shared intention or for one another, the members involved cannot see each other’s interfaces. What settings members employ in their Cybershaman programs on their personal computers remains private and entirely individual.

Concluding Comments

The Internet enables both i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe to create cyber religious communities reflective of their traditional spiritual movements. i-

205 Benjamin, “i need help.”
206 Ibid.
church reflects the institutions of The Anglican Church and Christianity in its structure, language and symbols, creating a sense of familiarity and authenticity for the community. The Cybershaman Tribe allows for an individual-focused space, open to the flow of ideas and brimming with various spiritual beliefs and choices. While i-church’s reflection of The Church of England provides a sense of security and tradition, The Cybershaman Tribe allows for freedom and autonomy. Shaping the cyber spaces of blogs, message boards, groups, and chat rooms according to the authority or autonomy of their respective spiritualities allows these websites to provide places through which members can comfortably communicate and form relationships. While this adherence to Anglican and neo-shamanic understandings of authority provides insight into how cyber religious community is crafted on the Internet, the ways these websites deviate from their traditional themes and ideologies also shape the communities of the two sites.
Chapter Three: Transforming Tradition

As the previous chapter explained, cyberspace allows i-church to construct a website and community organized around the Church of England and permits an arena where The Cybershaman Tribe can reflect the individualism and dynamism of neo-shamanism. It would be mistaken, however, to assume that cyberspace allows for structure only within the confines of i-church and dynamism and autonomy only within the space of The Cybershaman Tribe. Stig Hjarvard asserts that media “change the very ideas and authority of religious institutions and alter the ways in which people interact with one another when dealing with religious issues.”

This change in the role of authority appears evidently on the Internet. As Hoover explains, in the digital age “the whole mode of practice that defines cultural participation today operates on logics that put authority in a different place than in the past.” In the case of cyber religious communities, the Internet can allow for more member individuality in a traditionally institution-based religion like that of i-church and for a sense of structure and authority in a more democratic, autonomous New Age religion like the cybershamanism of The Cybershaman Tribe.

*Individuality in i-church*

Although it remains structured around the Church of England, the Diocese of Oxford, and the Priest in Charge, Pam, i-church enables the autonomy of its members, allowing them to participate in the construction of the community and to

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209 Ibid., xii.
grow spiritually on an individual level within a traditionally institutionalized religion.

Hoover illustrates:

Websites sponsored by conventional religious bodies that clearly articulate those bodies’ values and goals, nonetheless encourage a conditional autonomy. It’s a negotiation, and one where practice can alternatively evidence autonomous action and submission to history, doctrine, and authority. Hooper illustrates:

Websites sponsored by conventional religious bodies that clearly articulate those bodies’ values and goals, nonetheless encourage a conditional autonomy. It’s a negotiation, and one where practice can alternatively evidence autonomous action and submission to history, doctrine, and authority.210

One finds this mixing of reverence to an institutional body and the promotion of user individuality and autonomy that Hoover discusses prominently in i-church. i-church members exhibit autonomy in their ability to demarcate personal space in blogs and forum posts, to actively choose the direction of discussion and the ideas permeating the space, to discuss their personal lives in a detailed manner, and to individually construct personal identities through text. In these ways, i-church promotes member empowerment and spiritual introspection while creating community and relationships.

User autonomy in i-church can be seen first in the ability of every user to demarcate space and to publish personally relevant thoughts and information. i-church reflects Heidi Campbell’s notion that “With minimal resources individuals can publish a website or start an email list on their preferred topic, generating and discovering information of personal interest.”211 i-church users find choice in the platforms available for communication with other members. Some users blog, others write on forums, yet others talk in chat, and some members engage with a mixture of the three.


In response to my voluntary survey of i-church, one participant described his or her freedom in the site: “I was allowed to explore and settle ... in my own time. I was made to feel I was welcome to participate or just hover in the background if I needed more time to get to know people.” Participation and engagement with i-church becomes a personal choice in both the venues for communication and the extent of participation. This user appears to feel little pressure to engage with the community in a specific or institutionalized manner or even to speak at all. In fact, as evident in individual member pages, some users check in to i-church over the course of one or two years without ever creating a forum or blog post or logging into the chapel. A second i-church member explains, “I haven't attended Wednesday services for at least six months ... Recently, I've undertaken a blogging project at i-church.” This member's project demonstrates one way a user can engage with the i-church community, an approach appropriate to his or her personal spiritual journey. Even though he or she does not participate in ritual worship in the i-church Chapel, he or she chooses to engage with the community through another medium: blogging.

Participation becomes a question of choosing not only “where?” but also “when?” One i-church member elucidates in his or her survey reply, “It is easier to choose participation, hours, extent of engagement, set pace to suit.” The ability to access the Internet and the i-church website constantly makes this choice available. The same user notes, “I can be around i-church at different times (more times) than physical church.” Other members indicate that the freedom of when to participate is significant to their experience with i-church. One individual explains, “I can access i-

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church online at any time” and second user similarly recognizes, “I can visit i-church as often as I wish and at any time of the day or night.” Religious community in i-church, therefore, becomes not reliant on a physical church’s schedule, but instead remains constantly present and available for the individual needs and wishes of each member.

Users enjoy the sense of temporal freedom in i-church, even if no other members are logged on. One user comments, “in i-church there may well be nobody else present but I can still say what I want to say and look for the answer later.” Participation in i-church, therefore, does not rely on the choices or company of other users, but singularly on the autonomous decision of each individual member. i-church creates a space where every user always has a voice.

Once members choose which platforms of i-church to use, they can begin to craft personal space and narratives. Within the Courtyard, members create blog posts and message board threads. When a user writes a blog or message board post, he or she immediately becomes labeled the “author” of the post. With this title, the post becomes the space of the single user within the larger community, a space in which other users will address directly the author’s questions or thoughts. As Lundby describes, “Usually these blogs have a base in networked individualism, creating an alternative space … to established institutions.”213 While remaining within the framework of i-church as established by the Church of England, blogs and message board posts allow for nooks of individual thought. Furthermore, within these personalized spaces, individuals can speak openly about themselves without the

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pressures of remaining focused on a topic initiated by an administrator.

By simply scanning the “A Place to Talk” message board, one finds post after post entitled “Hello” or “Introduction” where new members take time to introduce themselves to the community and sometimes share their backgrounds and faith experiences.\(^{214}\) For example, one member introduced him or her self on September 15, 2013.\(^{215}\) This user described his or her history with Christianity and church and also expressed his or her feelings about work.\(^{216}\) These individual spaces of blog and forum posts reflect Maxwell’s assertion that the Web “can often be personally tailored and configured to one’s own preferences.”\(^ {217}\) Personalized posts organized around the thoughts of individual members facilitate introspection and exploration of new ideas about faith and life. As previously noted, one member describes i-church as a “reflective and introspective space” and explains his or her desire to blog as an opportunity to record his or her “spiritual experiences over the long run” and perhaps to “feel less discouraged.” Blogs allow this member to approach faith in a personal manner, looking inward rather than solely to the institution of the Church of England.

These personalized spaces enable members to not only to become more introspective about their faith, but also to actively construct the community. Users’ ability to write about their personal concerns, problems, and questions allows them to take control of the conversations and focus of the community. Although i-church has


\(^{216}\) Ibid.

a policy regarding the content of posts and moderators retain the ability to remove content, individuals can continue to stir up the questions and conversations asked on the site, to direct what ideas the community thinks about, and to answer other members’ questions in individual ways.

For example, one user began the forum topic, “To be Holistic or not to be?” about the community’s views on incorporating New Age practices into Christian faith.\textsuperscript{218} Four users responded, describing their personal experiences with and views on New Age practices, including yoga and Reiki.\textsuperscript{219} The inquiry of one user begins to shape the conversation in i-church, the ideas that permeate the space, and even the ways users conceive of and practice Christianity. In this way, i-church is, as Heidi Campbell describes, “both pre-shaped and co-created.”\textsuperscript{220} Although The Church of England and The Diocese of Oxford form the basis of i-church and the structure on which it is modeled, members continue to control the content created and the ideas circulating the community.

Despite the institution at the heart of the community, this ability for members to equally create content on i-church democratizes the site. This sense of member control also appears in one user’s assertion that “a single person in a physical church can be a lost voice, and this never seems to happen at i-church.” Whereas the voice of a single parishioner may be lost under the institution of a physical church, i-church provides platforms through which the ideas of all members’ ideas can be heard. Bailey and Storch describe blogs similarly, explaining them as “a world where everyone has

\textsuperscript{219}\textsuperscript{219} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{220}\textsuperscript{220} Campbell, \textit{Exploring Religious Community Online}, 75.
a voice, access to the marketplace of ideas, and the freedom to say whatever he or she wants.”

In the case of i-church, this sense of freedom of expression can be extended to message boards and even to the Café chat room. In these spaces, no authority figure dictates the course of the conversation or the ideas generated. Members can reference Church dogma, institution, or the Bible, but they can also include their own personal interpretations and stories. For example, in an i-church worship service, the prayer leader instructed practitioners to say their own preferred version of the Lord’s Prayer in their own time. This idea reveals Hoover’s notion: “This is not to say that tradition and doctrine are no longer important. … It’s just that those resources are today consumed conditionally and within a context of practice that puts power in the hands of the interpretive and active communities of the digital age.” In the case of the worship service, the prayer leader based the prayer in the tradition and doctrine of the Christian church; however, he or she also acknowledged the individuality of the parishioners and encouraged them to act out their faith in a personalized way. This instance reflects what Partridge calls, “networked individualism.” Although members are united through the institution of Christianity and their presence on the i-church website, they continue to engage with these networks with a sense of individuality and autonomy in their faith and participation.

In a voluntary survey, one new i-church member explained how with i-

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222 Hoover, “Foreword,” xii.

church, rather than a physical church, he or she observes “more time to speak [and] listen.” This comment suggests the ability of members to share their own voices and ideas through i-church and to listen to other ideas as well. Through this freedom to share and the opportunity to listen and learn from other members, individuals begin to shape a supportive cyber environment. Additionally, on a thread on the message board “The Deep End” one member explained that belonging to an online church allowed him or her to learn about more views of Christianity than any physical church ever did.\textsuperscript{224} This comment implies that i-church provides an opportunity for spiritual learning outside of the structures of a traditional Church of England church, and instead from other members. Furthermore, this response indicates an abundance of different views in i-church, introducing individual users to new ideas and practice. As the thoughts and beliefs of users mix in i-church’s virtual space, the dialogue and the opportunities for expression can facilitate a wider and more subjective understanding of faith. Not only the institution of the Diocese of Oxford, but also individual members, therefore, craft the i-church community. The fact that all members welcome one another to the site, best exemplifies this idea. For example, on the forum post “Back after a break,” five members welcome back a member to i-church.\textsuperscript{225} This communal welcome reveals how members view the site as their own collective space into which new individuals enter. i-church therefore, becomes not only the community of the Diocese of Oxford, but of all members.

These platforms for communication, moreover, allow users to access

information about each other’s personal lives and their individual approaches to faith.

In a voluntary survey, one i-church user explained why he or she feels close to i-church: “I’ve been conversing with some members for years. I know the names and occupations of other members. Personal matters and needs for prayer are shared.”

The ability of individuals to share their personal lives in i-church therefore creates a greater sense of intimacy and friendship between members. In response to the question, “How do you think this closeness [in i-church] compares to that of physical churches?” one member explained, “I spent nearly a year attending my local parish church without really getting to know anybody.” For this user, the opportunity to learn about other members directly evokes greater feelings of intimacy with i-church than with a physical church. For another i-church member, the communication spaces of the “forum and chapel/café” specifically promote closeness. These responses highlight Campbell argument that “Sharing real prayer needs enables members to … become more aware of the lives of others, and consequently more invested in them.”

Closeness, therefore, remains inherently tied up in the ability of community members to both communicate with one another and share their personal and spiritual lives.

Furthermore, members not only acknowledge that learning about others contributes to feelings of support and friendships, but also that the desire of other members to learn about their lives makes them feel close with the community. One i-church member shared that he or she feels close with i-church because, “Any comments I made were always acknowledge with a reply ..people seemed genuinely interested.” This member feels that other i-church users genuinely care about his or

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her life and hardships. Sharing his or her personal stories with a sincere and concerned community contributes to a “stronger bonding” with i-church. The Internet allows members to construct personalized spaces and to choose autonomously the topic of discussion within these individualized spaces. This individuality, in turn, leads to more intimate conversations about their own lives and a greater sense of support and community.

i-church members’ ability to individually construct and communicate their identities through the Internet and i-church results in the opportunity for user interaction and support. The Internet creates a space where people cannot be physically seen, but only defined and judged by the information they choose to present. In response to the voluntary survey, one member explained, “i-church members do talk about their own lives, but perhaps because the experience of ichurch (sic) is mediated through text, I tend to forget about large differences in status, which can make i-church seem more democratic.” This comment suggests that how members perceive others in i-church depends on the texts they present and what information they choose to reveal or conceal in those texts. Furthermore, this response reflects Campbell notion that “electronic communication allows certain social cues, such as status, power, and prestige to be hidden.”227 In a given electronic space, individuals cannot judge one another by any identifiers such as wealth, race, sexuality, or weight unless they announce or imply them to one another.

While communication in the physical world also “involves a projection through facial and bodily gestures; posture; clothes; make-up; jewellery; regalia; uniforms; vesture,” identity markers in the virtual world remain entirely dependent

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227 Ibid., 22.
upon the information members divulge through words and texts. Because cyber community users do not have access to each other’s visual cues, what a person types specifically determines how others can define him or her. In the words of Campbell: “Texts become a defining factor of who one is and what one does in cyberspace. Through texts, readers construct mental images of one another.” How one’s identity can be presented, constructed, and perceived, therefore, remains largely in the hands of each individual user.

In the Café, one member referenced difficulty typing due to his or her arthritis. Members of i-church can choose to reveal certain health ailments, for instance, in order to promote a better understanding of their lives. One i-church survey participant illustrates, “text type in the Courtyard reflects values to a certain extent.” By divulging personal information, other members can make assumptions about his or her age and life, however they also learn more about the person behind the screen.

Other members of i-church choose to keep certain elements of their identity hidden. For example, one i-church survey participant explained:

Because of the rules of i-church, I haven’t been able to share many of my traumatic experiences that have damaged my faith. … I accepted that from the beginning and have decided from the outset to be more creative with what I share about. … Yet these elements also protect me in a funny way too. I am able to make small changes in attitude as I go along without compromising the longevity of i-church relationships unduly. This gives me a sense of stability.

While this quote highlights the role of i-church authority and regulations in the

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229 Campbell, Exploring Religious Community Online, 20.
community, it also explains how individuals can use creativity to reclaim control over their identities. These creative portrayals then allow members to reflect on new perspectives and attitudes about their faith and life. As this person explains, relationships with and through i-church can be maintained through the omission of identifying information. Campbell similarly argues, “The fact that certain aspects of individuals can be hidden online is an advantage, giving people the opportunity to associate with those they might shy away from in real life.”

Through omission, individuals online can form new and more diverse connections with a variety of individuals, strengthening the sense of relationships and community presence.

Anonymity on the Internet, however, also allows people the choice to trust and be honest with one another in virtual spaces. Members can take time to think about what information they want to reveal, particularly in blogs and forum posts, and to choose the level of vulnerability they wish to show other members. Many cyber community members therefore feel that honesty through the Internet is a deliberate decision. Regardless of whether a member exposes personal information or conceals certain identity markers, i-church allows members the autonomy to construct their own identities through the Internet. As one i-church member describes in his or her survey reply, “Being able to shape my own role on the e-platform … is empowering.” i-church, therefore, can grant not only the Church of England a sense of authority and power, but it can also create a space for the personal empowerment of its users.

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231 Campbell, Exploring Religious Community Online, 110.
232 Ibid., 113.
233 Ibid., 134.
As previously discussed, Martínková asserts that no cybershamanic “institution” exists. Although The Cybershaman Tribe creates an environment largely reflective of neo-shamanism’s autonomy and focus on spiritual subjectivity, it also creates a space that enables the emergence of a central authority figure, a set of shared guidelines, common language and symbols, and a structured space that promotes interaction and community between members. In fact, the use of the term “tribe” in the title of the website largely reveals the sense of institution embedded in the cyber community. According to Google Dictionary, a tribe is “a social division in a traditional society consisting of families or communities linked by social, economic, religious, or blood ties, with a common culture and dialect, typically having a recognized leader.” The definition of the term tribe itself suggests a shared authority as well as shared values, language, customs and institution. In its very name, therefore, The Cybershaman Tribe immediately begins to resist the distinction between a community embedded in and centered on an institution and a community of autonomous individuals.

A sense of institution in The Cybershaman Tribe becomes visible in the presence of a central authority, Ernie. Ernie’s leadership in the community develops through his presentation of himself as the creator of the Cybershaman interface and The Cybershaman Tribe, his description of his shamanic knowledge, and the respect and reverence shown to him by the members of the community. The “Main” page of The Cybershaman Tribe, for example, declares the mission statement of the website:

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“This Cybershaman Community is dedicated to the exchange of ideas. All are welcome. Let’s try to support each others efforts. – Ernie Vega.” Although these goals represent the objectives of the entire community, the words remain attributed to the creator of the site, Ernie. By constructing the community’s objectives as a quotation of himself, the goals of the community become visibly centered around his own vision and goals. This citation, in fact, largely resembles how i-church references and reflects the aims of The Diocese of Oxford, The Benedictine Tradition, and Christianity in its mission statement. The self-quotation in the goals of The Cybershaman Tribe thereby similarly establishes Ernie’s ideals as those with which the community aligns and those that members should follow in their practice and experience with the community. In this way, Ernie constructs himself as the leader of the community, creating an authority for the site.

Ernie also establishes his role as the central of authority of The Cybershaman Tribe through his posts instructing others how to use the Cybershaman Interface, his mandates that members follow certain rules, and his explanation of how he invented the Cybershaman program. Ernie creates the post, “How to run Cybershaman VII – Free in Windows 7 (all versions) – SOLUTIONS Vs MYTHS” and a second post titled identically about “Cybershaman VIII,” which explain the technical problems of the Cybershaman program and outline in great detail the steps users must take to...

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236 Vega, “The Cybershaman Tribe.”
237 “What is i-church,” i-church.
solve them. The instructions include products users can purchase and Ernie additionally offers himself as a contact. By creating these posts and offering solutions, Ernie presents himself as the person in charge, who has the most wisdom about the Cybershaman program and to whom members must come to in order to acquire that knowledge. In this way, he establishes himself as the leader of the Tribe, raising himself above the website’s users through self-assertion of higher knowledge.

Ernie additionally establishes himself as the authority figure of The Cybershaman Tribe in his forum posts. Ernie begins the post, “IMPORTANT PLEASE READ – ABOUT THIS COMMUNITY” by welcoming users to the site and then details how the website works and how users can help it run smoothly and efficiently. By welcoming members into the community, he suggests that it is his community and his space into which other individuals enter. Furthermore, Ernie assures, “you will not be asked to pay anything at all, as long as I’m running this Community.” Ernie states openly that he “runs” the site—he developed it and remains in charge of it. Ernie’s position as the creator of the site as well as his ability to control the content gives him authority over the rest of the community members.

At the end of this post, Ernie explains, “Be sure to read the Terms of Service on the Main page at the bottom. They are few but I will insist on them being adhered to.” With Ernie’s mandate that members adhere to rules of the site as he created them, he elevates himself as an authority that all members must obey. Ernie also requires member obedience in his post, “UPDATE - Inviting your friends to join The

241 Ibid.
242 Ibid.
Cybershaman Tribe,” where he lays out the “Rules” of the site: “No Politics…No Sales.ads.localized (sic) to sites [that] sell stuff … No Religious preaching … No Spurious attacks … No Porn … No Spamming.” With the assertion of the word “No,” Ernie institutes himself as the enforcer of rules. Ernie controls how members interact with one another and what content appear on the community’s walls. At the end of the post, Ernie furthermore comments, “If you truly feel you want to invite more than 10 [people to the community], email me, and we can discuss it.” Members can only deviate from Ernie’s rules through direct discussion with him, a conversation in which he has the final word on the matter. Through the establishment of rules, Ernie immediately constructs himself as the leader and the authority figure of The Cybershaman Tribe community, creating a space less democratic and more hierarchical than suggested by Jakobsen’s New Age discourse on neo-shamanic spirituality.

Ernie powerfully asserts his authority through the creation of a foundation myth—a narrative of the birth of the Cybershaman program that remains inherently tied to his own birth narrative. Ernie opens the post, “How and why Cybershaman came about,” with a story about his own birth. Ernie asserts, “I have always been different. I was born dead by umbilical cord strangulation, and suffered brain damage in both hemispheres of the brain. People would say I was psychic, I felt no different than others but I knew some things would happen before they would happen.”

244 Ibid.
This statement constructs his sense of otherworldly power in multiple ways. While most other humans are born alive, Ernie “was born dead,” suggesting that from birth he has been able to transcend the boundaries between life and death that other humans cannot overcome.

This birth narrative draws connections to the mystical vocation and ecstatic experiences of traditional shamans. Eliade illustrates:

> Usually sicknesses, dreams, and ecstasies in themselves … transform the profane, pre-‘choice’ individual into a technician of the sacred … all the ecstatic experiences that determine the future shaman’s vocation involve the traditional schema of…suffering, death, resurrection.\textsuperscript{246}

Ernie’s birth narrative similarly functions as a story of death and resurrection, thereby establishing his vocation as a shaman and marking him as sacred. A traditional shamanic experience, however, involves descent from health into sickness or death. Ernie, born dead, takes on the entire initiation and transformation from profane to sacred existence in his birth, avoiding the phase of descent. Ernie performs as a “sick man” who, since birth, “has succeeded in curing himself.”\textsuperscript{247} Ernie’s sacred nature and his abilities to both transcend the physical and spiritual world and cure disease, therefore, remain innate.

Ernie associates his dead birth as one marker of his “difference.” Ernie does not explain from what or whom he is “different” but the statement implies a difference from the rest of human kind. On a physical level, Ernie remains different from all other humans in that while they are born alive, he was born dead. Ernie, however, also appears to suggest a spiritual difference. Eliade explains that the “unusual or abnormal experience” of sickness or death “[confers] peculiarity,”

\textsuperscript{246} Eliade, \textit{Shamanism}, 33.
\textsuperscript{247} Ibid., 27.
separating the shaman, marked as sacred, from his or her profane surroundings, and locating him or her on a different “supernatural plane.” Ernie’s unusual birth, therefore, marks him as sacred and thereby spiritually different from the rest of humanity. Ernie furthermore describes his “psychic” nature, suggesting a sense of intimacy with the spiritual world and a certain access to that world unavailable to other human beings. His psychic abilities illustrate Eliade’s notion that shamans “have access to a region of the sacred inaccessible to the other members of the community.” Ernie’s psychic ability once again separates him from the rest of humanity by an inherent sixth sense and mode of being.

Moreover, rather than placing himself in a position of spiritual power, Ernie explains that other people recognized this power in him, even when he denied such a privilege. His power and leadership becomes elected or imposed by the outside, by his birth and by those around him, rather than by his own pronouncement. According to Eliade, “‘self-made’ shamans are considered less powerful than those who…obeyed the ‘call’ of the gods and spirits.” By virtue of both his dead birth and the recognition of his powers by his community, Ernie becomes a powerful shaman, who follows an inherent call to the vocation. Furthermore, by tying the history of Cybershaman into his supernatural birth, Ernie establishes a sense of legitimacy in both the program and the site. The site was created not by Ernie the man, but by an individual with access supernatural forces, which in effect establish his authority and the power of the Cybershanaman program.

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248 Ibid., 32.
249 Ibid., 7.
250 Ibid., 13.
Ernie continues to assert his authority by describing how his skills and knowledge impacted the development of Cybershaman. Ernie explains, “I was a Pro and had a Master in Computer Science.” By recognizing his education, Ernie reveals his advanced knowledge of the inner-workings of computers and programing. The Cybershaman program, therefore, developed not only by virtue of Ernie’s intimate connection with the supernatural, but also from his training in computer science which validates his authority. With his educational history, Ernie roots his authority not only in the powers of the occult, but also in the rationality of science, modernity, and the West. Ernie furthermore associates his authority, knowledge, and experience with his contact with the New Age movement. He depicts his experience at a “New Age Crystal etc..” store and lists the names and authors of New Age books he read. By including these books and spaces of learning in the origin myth of the program, Ernie acknowledges the New Age literature and knowledge that came before him and describes his authority as part of a culture of New Age teachers and the growing field of New Age spirituality.

Ernie Vega continues to assert his authority in this origin narrative by evoking a sense of mysticism in the founding of Cybershaman. Ernie illustrates:

As soon as I finished the drawing and rendered [the device] to scale. I felt a weird (sic) sensation coming off the screen. like a buzz or tickle … Almost like a mild electrical current. This freaked me out. I had been working with computers for a while and never had an experience like that one. I sincerely thought I was going nuts. Technically this was impossible. To a trained scientist this is not in the realm of reason.

Ernie describes the experience as something surprising—not intended by the

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252 Ibid.
invention—and indiscernible to him both as a person and as a computer scientist. The encounter remains something that causes him to fear for his sanity—antithetical to rationality and reason. This description suggests that supernatural forces played a key role in the development of Cybershaman, implying a certain authenticity and other-worldliness to the program itself. Furthermore, in describing how he developed the different components of the program, Ernie asserts that some aspects cannot be understood. The Cybershaman program becomes again entrenched in the supernatural. Ernie, as the creator of the program, becomes the gatekeeper to that supernatural knowledge in the physical world and the sole authority of the program and energies.

Ernie Vega furthermore establishes his charismatic authority by both directly embedding himself in shamanic lineage as well as by asserting his place as the founder of a future branch of shamanism. In a discussion with a user, Ernie explains: “I was acknowledged as a Shaman of the line of Don Eduardo Calderon. … My sponsor underwent traditional initiation rites from Don Eduardo himself.” Ernie asserts that his shamanic abilities can be traced from a powerful shamanic lineage to which his personal teacher is directly tied. With this association, Ernie acknowledges his “theoretical and practical instruction at the hands of the old masters,” necessary for recognition as a shaman, thereby ascribing him shamanic legitimacy. Ernie furthermore explains that this shamanic sponsor “acknowledged” him as a Shaman.

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253 Ibid.
255 Eliade, Shamanism, 33.
256 Ibid., 13.
Ernie’s authority becomes again not determined by a self-proclamation but confirmed by other powerful shamans and authorized by his training.

Rather than simply placing himself into this shamanic lineage, however, Ernie asserts his place as the leader of a new shamanism. He describes, “When [my sponsor] completed his final initiation rites more than 30 years ago, he was told that the new Shamans would come from the West, and that they would be different,” immediately presenting the prophesy of a “new” type of shamanism. Ernie moreover, uses the term “different” to describe these new shamans, drawing a connection to himself and his inherent “difference” since birth. Next, he explains that his sponsor, “Out of nowhere … came to me and told me I was one of the new ones … So I’m not a traditional Shaman but I’m what may some day be the traditional Shaman.” The idea that he “may some day be the traditional Shaman” places shamanism on a teleology in which Ernie and his practice become the future. This statement suggests that, with Cybershaman and with this community, Ernie becomes the pioneer of shamanism, developing it in new and powerful ways. Following Ernie and participating in his community, therefore, allow members to also become unique forerunners of the future of shamanism.

Additionally, in his description of how the program came into existence, Ernie expresses, “It came to me that I wanted to create a Shaman in a computer. … I wanted a Cybernetic interface that could transform a user into a Shaman … I set out to create a program that would essentially emulate a shaman of no particular

\[258\] Ibid.
disciplines.” By wishing to create a computer as a shaman or a program that establishes shamans out of its users, Ernie appears to place shamanic agency into the hands of members or into the technology of the computer itself. However, the reliance of the program’s existence on his own power, ideas, work, and creation, establishes Ernie as the master, creator, and therefore, ultimate authority of the program. While certain aspects of the program, its energy and certain ways it functions, remain supernatural and outside the realm of Ernie’s knowledge, he in fact developed the system and, therefore, he alone possesses the most knowledge about the program, and ultimately exists as its mother and creator. In this way, Ernie’s position becomes reflective of “traditional” shamanism; Only Ernie holds the knowledge necessary to mediate and control the spiritual world and, by virtue this knowledge, he becomes offset from his followers who come to him seeking his program and skills in their own lives.

The Cybershaman Tribe’s reverence of Ernie additionally upholds his position as the central authority of the community. After Ernie shares his story, members comment on his powers and compliment his work. On Ernie’s post “How and Why Cybershaman Came About,” one user replied, “It will take for a while to digest all. Only [thing] I can say for now is ‘incredible’” and later commented, “I did not know you are a master level shaman. I feel really honored knowing you as a fellow shaman. Your shamanic method is so deep that it may not suit for a fainted heart.”

This member affirms Ernie’s position as a shaman and appears to respect and venerate his abilities, raising him above others with the title “master” and acknowledging his power and strength by distancing him from faint-hearted users. Another member exclaims, “You are a true genius!!! ‘Nuff said!” 261 By calling him a “genius,” he or she suggests that Ernie has greater knowledge than the average person. Ernie therefore not only presents his own skills, powers, and authority, but the community also affirms him as an experienced shaman with brilliant and unique spiritual insight. This affirmation of Ernie’s shamanic power echoes Eliade’s description of how shamanic communities among the Manchu and the Tungus of Manchuria must recognize a shaman as such before he can “exercise his function.” 262

The Cybershaman Tribe’s recognition of Ernie bestows upon him a certain power to aid the community with their spiritual endeavors.

The post “Blessings to Ernie; Tornado in New York City; causing outages and damages” also reveals the sense of care and respect members have for Ernie. 263 The post’s author explains that a hurricane hit Ernie’s home in New York and that “He … ask[ed] me to let everyone know; he won’t be online or able to proceed with business and communications.” 264 This post reveals both Ernie’s concern for the community and also his awareness of his position as operator of the site. The statement suggests that his absence from the Tribe will be felt, whereas other members’ absence for a few days may not be noticed.

262 Eliade, Shamanism, 17.
263 Conley, “Blessings to Ernie.”
264 Ibid.
Furthermore, the author asks for “good wishes and healing intentions” on behalf of Ernie, conveying care for the creator.\textsuperscript{265} When members other than Ernie experience life or environmental hardships, other users oftentimes show support on the member’s individual posts, however, they do not create posts requesting blessings on their behalves. Instead, Ernie stands in a privileged position as the creator and moderator of both the site and Cybershaman; when Ernie cannot connect with the community, his distance becomes recognized and when he finds hardships in life, the community rallies around him with support. This level of care around one person on The Cybershaman Tribe appears unique to Ernie, revealing his privileged position and leadership amongst the community.

Finally, the desire of community members to receive help directly from Ernie illustrates Ernie’s authority. Even in the Forums, intended for communication between all Tribe members, one finds posts written directly to Ernie. For example, one user begins the post, “Many questions ..(sorry about that),” with “Hello Ernie,” and then, after detailing many questions about the presents and numerology of Cybershaman, concludes his message with the statement: “Ernie ,I would appreciate it if you could answer to these questions.”\textsuperscript{266} By addressing Ernie in both the opening and the conclusion of his post, this user suggests that he seeks help from Ernie alone. The user wishes to engage directly with Ernie to acquire his superior knowledge, thereby placing Ernie in the position of a teacher, leader, and authority figure and himself in the role of the obedient student. Another user addresses “Ernie and guys”

\textsuperscript{265} Ibid.

in his message in the “Q and A” tab of The Cybershaman Tribe. While the post does not suggest that the user seeks help from Ernie alone, the post’s author makes a point to differentiate Ernie from the rest of the community by addressing him by name. The choice to state Ernie’s name and not the names of any other members implies a certain respect for Ernie and a recognition of his presence within the community, positioning him as more important or powerful than everyone else present on the site who he lumps into the collective term, “guys.” The way members directly address Ernie’s presence on the site and many times revere his knowledge and skills establishes his authority over the community and raises him to a position above the average member.

The Cybershaman Tribe not only develops a sense of institution in its authoritative leader, Ernie Vega, but also in its establishment of guidelines and rules for the website. On the bottom right of every webpage of The Cybershaman Tribe, one can find a link to the “Terms of Service.” The Terms of Service read:

The following Terms of Service apply to your use of this Network. You are solely responsible for your conduct and your content on the Network and compliance with these terms. By registering with us or using or browsing this Network, you acknowledge that you have read, understood, and agree to be bound by these terms.

While content and conduct remain the “responsibility” of the user, members must obey and abide by the rules designed by the institution of the community and its leader. By binding members to these Terms of Service, The Cybershaman Tribe

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gains a sense of control over the content and the conduct that takes place within the walls of the site.

Regulations that prohibit violations of property rights, viruses, spamming, the advertisement of illegal products or services, fraud, defamation, harm, discrimination and hate, misrepresentation, violence and advertisement function to construct a respectful environment among members of the Tribe and to regulate the site in a way that promotes the rights of all members. Despite the seemingly positive goals of these terms, however, these rules do impose an aspect of control on a site that explicitly promotes the personal spirituality and practice of individual members.

Moreover, the rules explicitly prohibit “irrelevant content.” Neo-shamanism, however, includes extremely diverse practices and beliefs; the breadth of practices included in cybershamanism therefore creates vagueness in regards to the distinction between “relevant” and “irrelevant content.” The power to determine what is considered irrelevant therefore remains the jurisdiction of the community’s institution and its leader. For example, one user created the post, “Would this be OT?” asking if talking about “symbolic machines” and “Reiki” practice would be off topic (OT). Ernie, responded:

How you integrate CS is as individual as you are. If it's for sale, you can't post links, or sell it. In that context it's fine but I need to know who makes it first. Some topics are taboo. We're going to learn as we go. I want to make it as open as possible without providing a commercial outlet for others.

In this reply, Ernie says that how a member uses the program and the website

269 Ibid.
remains the decision of the “individual.” However, he also asserts that individuals are
prohibited from posting about certain topics in certain contexts. While individuals can
choose their practice and create space on The Cybershaman Tribe as they wish, the
site and its creator retain the authority to designate and control what material
individuals present on the community walls. Moreover, by asserting that “he” wants
to make it as open as possible, Ernie once again establishes himself as the ultimate
authority and the creator of the rules as well as the site. In this way, although users
can produce content and create the general atmosphere of The Cybershaman Tribe,
the institution of the Tribe and its leader continue to maintain an overall control over
the space.

**Constructing Institution around Cybershaman: Structuring Space**

In her work, “Shamanism,” Jakobsen explains the New Age experience and
neo-shamanism in the context of the New Age bookshop, which provides a variety of
ideas and traditions from which New Agers can individually choose to practice.\(^{272}\)
Jakobsen argues, “There is no institution in which New Agers gather” and
furthermore, “The need of the single New Ager is determined and satisfied by
‘shopping around.”\(^{273}\) In the setting of a bookshop, New Agers have the freedom to
individually pick and choose practices and literature at their will. The bookshop and
its owners, however, pre-determine and lay out the materials from which New Agers
can choose. Similarly, I have found that while members choose individually to
incorporate certain tools of The Cybershaman Tribe into their Cybershaman
practice, they must work within the framework of the website itself. Furthermore,

\(^{272}\) Jakobsen, *Shamanism*, 152.
\(^{273}\) Ibid., 151-152.
much like how through the New Age bookshop “one might … find and create links with like-minded people,” members of The Cybershaman Tribe can communicate through the framework of the site to form a community and connect with individuals across the globe. However democratic this community may seem, however, members of The Cybershaman Tribe form these connections under the institution and through the layout of the website itself. The community crafted, therefore, also remains a product of the website’s structure.

The structure of The Cybershaman Tribe website provides a sense of institution for the community that congregates in and interacts through its pages. As discussed in the previous chapter, The Cybershaman Tribe homepage provides different tabs that link users to new pages within the Tribe’s web space. How these spaces are divided and the tools that they provide create an institution of sorts for the kinds of communication and bonds that can form. Although individuals can choose to click the link to the “Library” and read about “Radionics and Psionics” or “Diamond Sutra,” to create a post about one’s desire to win his or her ex-lover back in the “Forums,” or to engage with other members about “breathing for life” in the “Breath Work” group, these choices of “Library,” “Forum,” and “Groups” have been provided by the site itself and its creator.

Without the option of a “General” forum where members can discuss personal intentions and struggles, for example, one member could not share his or her story of his or her “very sick budgie” and other members could not support him or her through this personally difficult time. The user pleads, “Please help me create the

274 Ibid., 152.
most perfect settings to send healing waves to my budgie. His name is Sasha. He is of blue color. He has been very sick for three months.”

The user explains that specialized vets do not practice where he or she lives and the available vets do not know what is wrong with the bird. Members respond with setting suggestions, but also with kind words of support: “I understand completely, I have a 6 yr (sic) old Pit Bull … when I think about her only having a short life span, I get the angst.”

This reply provides empathy and understanding to the struggling member. Furthermore, after the budgie died, the original poster announced the news in the comments.

Even though the user no longer needed spiritual help to keep his or her bird alive, he or she shared his or her grief, indicating a search not only for technical knowledge, but also community support. One person replies with such support, offering comfort as he or she writes, “You have my condolences. Sasha is now cruising the cosmos.”

Had The Cybershaman Tribe only provided links to “Library,” “Links” and “Content,” the site might have served as a purely informational space, but the Forum “General” provides an opportunity for communication and care.

The construction of spaces such as “Discussion” and “Member Area” allow members to discuss their individual concerns and spirituality in their own ways. The Cybershaman Tribe website lays out space for members to share art, videos, and blog.

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276 Ibid.
277 Ibid.
278 Ibid.
posts, to create groups, and to write forum posts. The choices of the administration and the choices provided to members by this administration allow individuals to share their personal lives, to form intimate connections, to communicate with one another in new and personal ways, and to “support each others efforts.” However, just as the website’s statement of intent derives from the goals of a common authority figure, so too have the opportunities and spaces for members to discuss, pursue and express individual spirituality been defined and designed in an institutional manner.

Constructing Institution around Cybershaman: Connecting Through Language and Symbols

Much like i-church, The Cybershaman Tribe develops institution through its use of language, symbols, and images common to and deriving from the Cybershaman software. According to Campbell, online communities, as distinguished from online groups, “have members, a social organization, language and patterns of interaction, and a shared culture and identity.” As with i-church, however, the Internet requires that the modes of interaction in The Cybershaman Tribe remain entirely text-based. The survey participant recognized this difference with physical interaction, explaining, “face to face I read on a dozen modes and many subconscious levels. electronic communications limit one to verbal constructs and astral mental intuitional insights.” In other words, while face-to-face communication can include emotional, facial, and gestural cues, cyber communication only operates through texts or “verbal constructs.” Despite the limits of text-based communication, however, The Cybershaman Tribe creates a language and shared identity through

202 Campbell, Exploring Religious Community Online, 44.
common use of the Cybershaman interface.

The Cybershaman Tribe uses certain language and terms that relate specifically to the Cybershaman interface as developed by Ernie Vega. Upon first entering the Discussions section of the site, I found myself confused by the questions users asked, primarily because the terms appeared vague and unclear to me. The term I found most common and most confounding on the site was “intention.” Posts upon posts ask questions about how best to phrase an intention or, once an intention had been formed, how to choose the best Cybershaman settings to reinforce that intention. I found myself frustrated, asking aloud: Intentions for what? Intentions for coming to the site? For using the program? What does it mean for an intention to “work”? Only after spending a significant amount of time reading the “Discussions” pages and thinking about how members used the word “intention,” could I begin to understand the term.

Members using The Cybershaman Tribe Forum primarily employ the term “intention” in three different ways. First, some users ask for help on how best to phrase their intentions on the CS interface. For example, one user asked for help about how to form an intent that reverses depression. In other words, he or she wishes to know how to set his Cybershaman Interface to achieve the opposite of depression: “happier feelings.” One of the site moderators, responded to this question, giving him specific instructions about how to type his intention, what feelings to generate when running the program, which buttons to push, and even

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284 Ibid.
suggestions of other intentions to use. He or she explains, “Basically: In the intention window type the word Depression or Depressionanddepressingthoughtsanddepressionsymptoms or rootcauseofdepressionanddepressionsymptoms.” This user does not give a general idea of an intention or goal for the user’s Cybershaman practice, but instead offers specific ways of typing and phrasing that goal. The user additionally suggests that the other member crafts an intention that “infuse[s] happy feelings.” This intention remains similar to the first but incorporates more detail; this second intention not only reverses depression, but also attracts happiness. This dialogue, therefore, reveals that the term “intention” in the context of The Cybershaman Tribe must be phrased in a specific way for the program to run properly and for the user to achieve his or her desired result. The term, therefore, remains unique to Ernie’s Cybershaman program and includes connotations distinctive from the dictionary definition of “intention,” unassociated with The Cybershaman Tribe or the interface.

The Cybershaman-specific nature of the term “intention” becomes clearer in one user’s comment: “Why have you used the intention without spaces? What's the difference in writing intention with & without spaces?” “Intentions” are not only the desires of the member, but also the specific phrasings of the goals as typed out and input into Cybershaman. A person not familiar with the program or the site may be able to understand “intention” as an aspiration or desire, but he or she cannot

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286 Ibid.
287 Ibid.
understand the comprehensive use of the term. In this way, the term begins to craft boundaries between Cybershaman “insiders” and “outsiders,” and the community begins to find definition in the use and comprehension of a language specific to members and incomprehensible (at least initially) to non-members. The origin of such definitions in the Cybershaman program locates the interface as the community’s shared institution and authority.

The language of intention can also be used to organize a group Cybershaman ritual, beneficial to all involved members. In the post entitled “Psionic Playground Intentions in Wealth and Prosperity” one user proposes that members simultaneous set their Cybershaman programs to a common intention for wealth and prosperity.\(^{289}\) The post’s author calls for members to comment about “modes and methods” for practice as well as intentions they would like to use.\(^{290}\) In the comments, users discuss both intentions and phrasings of these intentions.\(^{291}\) One member offers, “it doesn’t really matter how you think, but realize you already have [abundance] and set up an intention that you accept and allow the abundance to come.”\(^{292}\) Another user agrees that intentions should be open and positive, while also describing his or her personal experience: “defining what specific kind of boon we want isn’t a problem.”\(^{293}\)


\(^{290}\) Ibid.

\(^{291}\) Ibid.


Together, the two users agree that intentions should not focus on the current lack of a specific good or opportunity, but should instead define what, collectively, the community wants while remaining open to how the desired outcome manifests.\textsuperscript{294} The conversation reinforces the concept that the term “intention” retains a meaning specific to the Cybershaman software in which intentions must be phrased and used in particular ways in order to be effective. In this way, the community takes a term, common and vague in the world outside of Cybershaman, and reclaims it in a way unique to the community of software users. The language becomes a boundary-defining and structure-organizing tool, and The Cybershaman Tribe becomes a defined and unified community around the use of a central program.

The Cybershaman Tribe members, however, also take the idea of an intention and transform it into a group endeavor. One user, N, desires to set up a group Cybershaman session for “ho’oponopono,” or forgiveness, love and “[taking] responsibility for everyone’s actions. [N]ot only [your] own.”\textsuperscript{295} The user refers to the ritual as a “group intention” and offers a specific intention for the group to run:

\begin{quote}
perform deep ho’oponopono cleaning on all members of the psionic playground I love you I’m sorry please forgive me thank you.
\end{quote}

This post suggests that all members input the same intention, typed the same way, into their Cybershaman interfaces while meditating on it. Although the intention remains “specific,” it becomes a group endeavor and no longer remains personal.

\textsuperscript{294} “Replies to this Discussion,” \textit{The Cybershaman Tribe}, accessed April 2, 2014, http://cybershaman.ning.com/group/psionicplayground/forum/topics/psionic-playground-group?commentId=2808075%3AComment%3A3205&groupId=2808075%3AGroup%3A3132.


\textsuperscript{296} Ibid.
This post is only one of a handful of proposals for group Cybershaman sessions on The Cybershaman Tribe.

Other proposals suggest that the community creates the intention together. In the post “Psionic Playground Group Intentions in Wealth and Prosperity,” the author encourages members to “put [their] two cents in” about what intention to use and writes that the group will “vote on the modes and methods,” including the intention. In the comments, members reply with intention suggestions. One member writes, “I believe we should do a group effort to establish a shared pot of Gold. Lotto, Business venture, or what ever everyone can agree on. I have a good idea for a business. If anyone is interested. And it is a humanitarian project as well.” This user contributes his or her opinion about the intention, while also acknowledging the views of other users who should all agree on and be interested in the intention. In these instances, the term “intention” not only unifies members around the software, but also crafts the intention itself as a community endeavor.

Through these proposals and these group rituals, the term intention begins to take on a new meaning only for Cybershaman users who also participate in The Cybershaman Tribe. Moreover, only in a community of multiple members networked together through spirituality could such a collective use of Cybershaman “intentions” exist; the Cybershaman Tribe provides that network. Much like with the candle and cross emoticons in i-church, this reinterpretation of the word “intention” enables new

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298 Ibid.
opportunities for ritual and community building, specific to the unique cyber religious community alone.

Members of The Cybershaman Tribe also use the term “intention” in the context of asking for advice on “symbols” to powerfully run the intentions. Much like the term “intention,” the use of the word “symbol” holds meaning specific to Cybershaman. On the General Forum, for example, one member explains, “I am having the baccalaureat (sic) exam this year… I am looking for some help on the right configuration program (sic) and symboles (sic).” Immediately, this user expresses his intention in running the Cybershaman Interface: good grades. In this case, the member does not use the Cybershaman-specific format for his intention; however, he presents his desire specifically in the context of running the program.

The user asks specifically for suggestions about symbols that will facilitate the achievement of his or her goal. This language does not imply what will be done with the symbols – will they be meditated on? Another user clears up my question when he or she explains: “Here are a few symbols that would be helpful for support in your intellectual pursuits. You can place them in the symbols section of Cybershaman then pull them into your intentions.” The user additionally attaches four images of related symbols. Her response allows the reader to understand that the term symbol, much like intention, holds meaning specific to Cybershaman and the program itself has a section in which users input symbols in order to drive their interfaces.

302 Ibid.
Moreover, in providing symbols, this member refers to post author’s specific intentions, his “intellectual pursuits”; descriptions of intentions can allow users to better help one another with personal Cybershaman endeavors. In this way, the language of “intent” and “symbols” begin to form a language specific to the Cybershaman program, and the community becomes unified in these definitions and shared conceptions of what these terms achieve for individual users. Cybershaman, therefore, exists as the defining authority and institution of the community under which all members become unified.

The Cybershaman-specific use of symbols also serves as an opportunity for members to unite in spiritual practice. In group intentions, members agree upon and input the same symbols into their individual Cybershaman Interfaces. On the “Psionic Playground Group Intentions in Wealth and Prosperity” thread, one user suggests symbols for the group to use when running the Cybershaman program collectively. He or she writes, “Here are some symbols we may use. Just copy then right click on save as and save it in your C:programfiles\Cybershaman\symbols directory. It will show up in your symbols when you go to choose them.”303 This post not only suggests that all members of the group run the same symbols in the Cybershaman program, but also that they all run them in the same way, by following the directions that he or she lays out, specific to how the Cybershaman software functions. Spiritual practice with Cybershaman, therefore, requires loyalty to the program as created by Ernie Vega and to the language and method of using symbols as appropriate to this program. The program, therefore, becomes a unifying authority to which all members adhere. Members have autonomy in the goals they pursue and

in the images and language they apply to the pursuit of them, however, this
individuality functions within the framework of the program. Much like how the
institution of The Church of England provides the language and symbols that the
community of i-church mediates and interprets in the context of the Internet, so too
does The Cybershaman Tribe reflect to the institution of the Cybershaman interface
in its community discussion, rituals, and partnerships.

Symbols, designed to remain personal to individuals’ Cybershaman interfaces,
also become reinterpreted in The Cybershaman Tribe for group spiritual practice. In
the context of a group Cybershaman session, members use symbols not to power
individual desires, but instead to drive collective intentions with Cybershaman. In the
proposal for a group “Wealth and Prosperity” session, the author writes, “Here are
some symbols we may use,” and provides three images.\(^304\) By using the word “we”
and embedding symbols in the text, he or suggests that members all input the same
symbols into their interfaces. Like intentions, symbols lose their personal nature in
group Cybershaman sessions. Moreover, The Cybershaman Tribe facilitates the
collective use of symbols; without the networked community of individuals, members
could not communicate and share symbols in collective ritual. Symbols, like language,
can derive from larger institutions but become appropriated and adopted in ways
specific to particular communities, uniting only members of those communities
through their shared understandings and conceptions of their meanings.

Concluding Comments

While i-church remains founded by and inherently linked to the institution and traditions of The Anglican Church and traditional Christianity, its members develop a sense of individuality and autonomy in their ability to ask questions on the site, to choose which site platforms to engage with, and to reveal information about their personal lives and identities. Conversely, however, the neo-shamans of The Cybershaman Tribe, unable to successfully organize a communal ritual and each pursuing their individual intentions through the Cybershaman Interface, also exhibit a common institution and shared authority in the Cybershaman software and its creator, Ernie. The sense of individuality in a traditionally institutionalized faith and the sense of institution in a movement commonly recognized by its spiritual subjectivity and eccentricity reveal the sense of novelty the platform of the Internet can infuse in religion, including the new ways members can network, communicate, and connect through common religion. Furthermore, cyberspace and the mediation of text involved in cyberspace not only rearrange the supposed binaries of individual and institution-based spirituality, but also create interim spaces that straddle and blend these two binaries, allowing them to come together in a way that enables support and constructs community.
Conclusion: Constructing Community through the Internet

In her article “Computer Mediated Religious Life of Technoshamans and Cybershamans,” Libuše Martínková criticizes the Cybershaman program, calling it “magical” and “useless” to the study of cybershamanism. She asserts, “[The Cybershaman computer software has] nothing to do with cybershamanism. The Cybershaman is the computer program, designed for the (cyber) magical rituals of sigils.” Martínková defines the Cybershaman software as magic, differentiating it from religion and “true” cybershamanism.

Upon first reading Martínková’s article, I became concerned that my study of The Cybershaman Tribe was not a look at cyber religion at all. Emile Durkheim, however, distinguishes religion from magic in “The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life.” In this significant work, Durkheim asserts that magic “does not result in binding together those who adhere to it, nor in uniting them into a group leading a common life.” He defines religion, by contrast, as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things … which unite into one single moral community.” Although users pursue the manifestation of individual desires through the use of Cybershaman, The Cybershaman Tribe, as this work has illustrated, binds together members who adhere to this spiritual practice and establishes an institution of unified beliefs, practices, and terms specific to both the program and the website community. The Cybershaman Tribe and its members, therefore, exist as a religious community rather than magic-practicing individuals. Durkheim’s definition of

306 Ibid.
308 Ibid., 47.
religion, however, not only applies to The Cybershaman Tribe, but also to i-church, where members become connected through the structure, language, authority and practices of the website and united in Christianity and The Church of England. By virtue of their foundations in communal spiritual support and shared practices, therefore, both i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe exist as cyber religious communities.

Although Martinková does not criticize the notion of cyberspiritual authenticity as a whole, some scholars, as discussed in the Introduction of this work, argue that the shift in spirituality from the physical world to cyberspace marks a desacralization of the West and social isolation between individuals.309 These scholars argue not that one site fails to exhibit religion, but instead that cyberspirituality as a concept is devoid of religion and creates an “inauthentic” religious community in comparison to those engaged in physical spiritual practice. This study illustrates how participants of two cyberspiritual websites, The Cybershaman Tribe and i-church, instead describe closer relationships in cyberspace than in their physical religious communities and explores how the Internet enables the construction of these intimate connections. Over the course of the last three chapters we have discovered many ways in which the Internet provides opportunities for both sacred experiences and the development of close relationships in the communities of The Cybershaman Tribe and i-church.

The space of the Internet provides numerous opportunities and resources for the development of religious practice. Whereas a physical church may limit visitation to specific hours of operation, both The Cybershaman Tribe and i-church allow

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309 Partridge, Re-Enchantment, 145.
individuals to discuss their spiritual practices and engage with other practitioners at the times of their choosing, thereby freeing spirituality from the constructs of time and space and allowing for a more constant sense of the sacred in users’ lives. Members of both sites can write blog or forum posts, talk over chat rooms, perform a Cybershaman session or prayer, or read about spirituality at all times of day or night. These sites, furthermore, provide multiple venues for spiritual participation. Some users participate in communal rituals (either i-church Wednesday Worship services or group Cybershaman sessions coordinated over the website’s Forums). Alternatively, other users write on the websites’ forums where they share their personal spiritual practices and struggles and respond to other members with advice, suggestions, and emotional support. In this way, members discover new ideas and opportunities for spiritual practice in the platforms of their choosing while also existing in a text-based, permanent realm that can be accessed for years to come.

Both websites, additionally, provide constant access to informational resources. Whereas i-church offers links to daily prayers and Bible liturgies, The Cybershaman Tribe presents readings on Radionic, Psionics, The Diamond Sutra, and Tarot. Both websites connect users to an overarching institution: i-church includes links to The Diocese of Oxford and the Priest in Charge while The Cybershaman Tribe connects members to the website Cybershaman software, its manual, and its creator, Ernie. These institution-based resources, moreover, establish a sense of legitimacy for each website, connecting the spiritual tradition available on each to a sacred tradition and authority. Through this abundance of opportunities for spiritual learning and practice, both The Cybershaman Tribe and i-church provide
new opportunities for members to experience the sacred or, in Partridge’s terms, “re-enchant” \(^{310}\) and rediscover “meaning in their lives.”\(^{311}\)

Secondly, rather than instigating the social isolation of members, cyberspace provides new opportunities and avenues for human connection and relationship building in The Cybershaman Tribe and i-church. As noted in the surveys of both communities, multiple users of cyber religious websites also participate in physical communities. In these cases, cyber communities do not replace physical community but instead supplement them. Members of both i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe, additionally, described experiences of meeting other group members in person. Rather than communicating over the Internet to avoid social interaction in the physical world, members of both sites maintain their physical-world relationships and also make efforts to bring their cyber relationships into the physical world.

Members, furthermore, discuss their physical world relationships in their cyberspiritual practice. Intentions discussed in The Cybershaman Tribe blogs and forums, for example, often concern romantic relationships in the physical world, such as getting an ex-lover back or developing confidence with women. Other individuals, furthermore, want to cure the illnesses of family members. i-church members also involve their physical-world relationships in their cyberspiritual practice. Many members petition for prayers, both in the Chapel and in the Prayer forum, for family members, friends, loved ones and parishioners in their physical churches. These cases reveal not how members isolate themselves from physical-world sociability, but rather

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\(^{310}\) Ibid., 3.  
\(^{311}\) Ibid., 1.
how they seek answers to difficulties in their physical-world relationships through the Internet in cyber religious communities.

i-church and The Cybershaman Tribe not only provide comfort and support for physical-world relationships, but also enable opportunities to build and sustain new relationships through the Internet. As one member explained, i-church provides more opportunities to “speak and listen” than physical church. i-church enables communication through blogs, forums, and chat where members discuss their personal problems and spiritual goals. Through these platforms, also available in The Cybershaman Tribe, members learn about one another and their professional, spiritual, and personal lives, forming intimate connections with each other. In this way, rather than stifling human connection, the Internet provides new avenues and occasions for it. Furthermore, the sense of anonymity and mediation through text serves a democratizing function, allowing members who may not usually interact to approach one another and connect. The international space of the Internet additionally sustains new relationships between members not present in the same geographic space. Finally, the platform of cyberspace in i-church allows isolated individuals—both geographically and by means of health ailments—to form connections with other humans that they could not otherwise chat with. Rather than hindering human sociability and relationships, therefore, the cyber religious communities expand opportunities for them.

The construction of cyber religious community, therefore, with its occasions for both sacred practice and human connection, relies on the combination of religious institution and member individuality made available by the Internet. While the website i-church.org gains a sense of legitimacy from the authority of The Church of
England in its structure, language, and symbols, it also provides opportunities for individual spirituality, introspection, and relationship development through the communication-focused spaces of blogs and forums. Cybershaman.ning.com similarly creates space for spiritual autonomy, reflective of neo-shamanism, in its constantly available forums and its support for individual Cybershaman practice. The platform of the Internet, however, allows for the construction of an institution in this subjective, New Age spirituality. The Cybershaman Tribe crafts authority around the program Cybershaman and its creator, Ernie Vega who institutes his authority through a birth narrative reflective of a shamanic call to initiation, the establishment of website rules and regulations, and the recognition of his power by practitioners. The institution around which each of these websites structures itself enables unity among its members while the spaces available for discussion of personal spiritual beliefs empower members and allow them to support one another through individual struggles.

Moreover, both The Cybershaman Tribe and i-church create new languages and codes exclusive to their respective cyber religious communities. In this way, members not only become united around external institutions, but they also find bonds exclusive to the communities, bonds centered on terms and symbols inaccessible to those outside of the specific group. The way these communities uniquely use language and symbols enables communication, emotional support, and collective rituals, each of which contributes directly to the development of community. In the cases of The Cybershaman Tribe and i-church, constructing community through the Internet, therefore, not only involves introducing individuality to traditionally institution-focused religions and establishing a central authority for an individual-centered spirituality, but also creating new meanings,
terms, symbols, and spaces where the binaries of “institution” and “autonomy” do not simply meet side by side, but instead function together to craft member unity and relationships.


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