Cyber Paganism: Internet usage patterns among Israeli Neo-Pagan believers / Korbet Rinat

Abstract:

This research explores the intersection between two key elements that have accompanied human society since almost the dawn of history technology and religion. Until the last decade of the twentieth century, religious communities were characterized by means of their belonging to a mutual geographic space and execution of collective rituals in physical holy centers. Recently, with the growth and expansion of the web, we witness the formation of virtual religious communities in online space, and the transformation of this space to a unique religious sphere. In the virtual age, religious believers use computer-mediated communication for various purpose that range from location information about religious customs and beliefs, creating discourse and social relationships with believers that hold similar or adverse world views, and even in order to perform virtual rituals (Campbell, 2005a; Kong, 2001).

Most of the research literature in the field of spiritual-religious expressions on the internet examined the religious use of thee internet by believers of institutionalized and monotheistic religions. Research findings show that believers belonging to these religions communities have a need to justify their religions use of the internet through various narratives and discourses. Traditional religions communities negotiate over the use of the internet technology because technology is often perceived as modern, secular, and contradictor to religions creed.

The internet has opened new and unique opportunities for researchers for the inquiry of religions expressions of un-institutionalized and "invisible" religions, as named by Thomas Luckamnn (1967 in Krueger, 2004) due to paucity of empirical findings in regard to them. The current research studies the study of internet usage patterns among Israeli neo-pagan believers, and wishes to contribute to the forming body of research knowledge concerning religions expressions on the internet. Neo-pagan believers hold a variety of beliefs, practices, and religions that belong to the modern paganism movements. The mutual characteristic of the modern paganism movements are: reference to nature as sacred and as object of worship, reliance on the ancient pagan religions, focus on ritual and myth and a tendency towards polytheism or pantheism rather than monotheism. Today, there are many sites dedicated to modern paganism on the web. Although there is an escalation in the belief in witchcraft and paganism in the modern age it still isn't perceived as a legitimate religions belief by wide sectors worldwide. The need for secrecy makes it hard for neo-pagans to form a local-geographical community in which to acquire religions and ritualistic knowledge. Therefore, many neo-pagan believers turn to the web in order to find a spiritual-religious community that is otherwise difficult to find in their near environment and also to locate religious identify (Fernback, 2002; Klassen, 2002; McIntosh, 2004; Pearson, 2002; Strmista, 2005).

Within the framework of the current research, we examined two research questions aiming to determine the internet usage patterns of Israeli neo-pagan believers:

- What are the types of internet usage among Israeli neo-pagan believers?
- What are the perceptions about internet usage among Israeli neo-pagan believers?

These questions were examined I the context of a specific virtual pagan space: The "paganism in Israel" forum, which has exists since the beginning of the new millennium. The research relied on the qualitative paradigm and the ground theory method in order to perform a content analysis of the online discourse in the forum. Additionally, in-depth half-structured interviews were conducted with prominent neo-pagan believers selected from the forum's participants. The content analysis process of the message sample from the "paganism in Israel" forum, as well as the analysis of the transcripts of the interviews content, was conducted according to Shkedi's four stage of content analysis (2003). The content analysis of the forum and interview's discourse was divided into two kinds: A thematical analysis illustrating types of internet usage among research participants, and a typological analysis based upon the five conceptual models offered by Campbell (2005a), illustrating the perceptions of the participants about this usage.

Fifty-seven secondary thematical variables were established during the thematical analysis that represents the context of the online discourse in the Paganism in Israel forum. These variables: religious definitions, information sharing, social interactions, authority, religious-spiritual practices, nature, the pagan community and society and culture commodities. The most commonly appearing primary variable was that of religious definitions, which is in accordance with the theological and philosophical character of the forum. The typological analysis reveals that the most common conceptual models among the research participants are "The internet as information space" and "The internet as a sacramental space". These results helped determine the main catalog that characterizes the discourse in the forum and interviews about internet usage, which is the attempt to form the identity of the Israeli pagan community.

The thematical analysis and the typological analysis have been proven as useful analytical tools for the examination of the types of uses and perceptions about internet usage of religious believers. Results of the current research indicate that as opposed to believers from other religions, neo-pagan believers have no substantial religious or ideological aversion to religious usage of internet technology. however, they hold certain perceptions that define the internet as appropriate for use only as means serving limited and constricted purposes.

This research offers a theory that attempts to explain the internet usage patterns among Israeli neo-pagan believers as reflected in the research results. The theory presents a few key characteristics of the neo-pagan believers and the neo-pagan community that affect the way they use online space. The theory is divided into axises:

1. Individualism Vs. community cohesion.
2. Hidden knowledge vs. explicit knowledge.
3. Religious struggle vs. cooperation.

The first axis refers to needs of the individual in regard to the pagan community to which he belongs. The second axis refers to the information and knowledge needs of the pagan community members. The Third axis refers to the needs of the pagan community as a whole, which are needed for its persistence, stability and development. In the discussion chapter, we describe each of these exises in detail and their effect on the online Israeli-pagan discourse. To conclude, we suggest a few research directions for future study of the subjects presented in the current research.

System No.

1162431.