

Emerging church bloggers in Australia:

Prophets, priests and rulers in God's virtual
world

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

I, Paul Emerson Teusner, hereby declare that:

- a) except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work shown in this thesis is mine alone;
- b) work in this thesis has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award;
- c) the content herein is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program;
- d) any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by another party is acknowledged, and
- e) ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

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1.0 Thesis summary

The emerging church movement is built on a postmodern critique of both contemporary expressions of traditional/mainstream Protestant Christian community, and modern forms of Evangelical Christianity that is found in the “mega-churches”. Its task is to seek a viable alternative to these apparently mutually exhaustive models of Christian community and practice. In the offline world, emerging church communities are small groups of people who are locally based and often not connected, in any formal sense, to any other emerging church group outside their traditional denomination. Online, bloggers converse over emerging church practices and criticisms of traditional and Evangelical theology to construct a global identity.

This research aims to uncover how blogging technology is used by those involved in the emerging church conversation to construct individual and communal religious identities. This is its main question. It is expected insights into the following secondary questions will be shown:

- How do religious attitudes towards the Internet and blogging contribute to the way people interact online?
- What contributions and constraints do blogging software, and people’s use of it, offer the construction of online identity?
- How are bloggers working together to construct an emerging church theology, ecclesiology and missiology?
- How is authority distributed among emerging church bloggers, in relation to other systems of authority both online and offline?
- What can be said about the place of the emerging church blogosphere in the current tensions of 21st century Australian religious sociology?

The emerging church blogosphere appears at the convergence of a number of factors that are of interest to researchers in the fields of sociology, religion and media. Firstly there is the perceived

re-entrance (what Casanova calls the “deprivatisation”) of institutional religion into the public, mass-mediated, sphere of secular society (Breward, 1988; Casanova, 1994). This re-entrance is conditioned by the language of partisan politics, that tends to place religious groups and identities along a single moral-political spectrum (Thompson, 1994). Then, there is the postmodern search for a religious identity that correlates with a post-structuralist worldview against declining religious institutions and a rapidly growing spiritual marketplace (Davis, 1998; Finke and Stark, 2005; Heelas and Martin, 1998). Thirdly, there is the rise of the personal, or as Castells puts it, the “me-centred”, network as a dominant pattern of sociability in late modernity, that challenges conceptions of family and embedded communities as main determinants of cultural (and religious) identity (Castells, 2001).

While the first three factors mentioned are offline, they offer a ground for the reception and use of the Internet for the purposes of religion. Highlighted are concerns and debates about the nature of “virtual” identity, community and religious experience, seen as incomplete, duplicitous, and mere “play”, or as continuous with offline identity and interaction in the quest for authenticity (Hine, 2000; Kennedy, 2006; Turkle, 1996). Internet research also calls into question the promises that the blogosphere promotes: democratisation of public voices, the blurring of public and private discourses, and the blurring of distinctions between producer, user and media text (Beer and Burrows, 2007; van Dijck, 2009). Moreover, while the blogosphere promises a parliament on the usefulness of religious practices and structures in the construction of authentic religious identity, whether it does so on certain terms is an important consideration. It must be asked, what discursive products and practices are required for entry into the blogosphere, and by what conditions are people given voice and authority (Turner, 2007).

At the nexus of these debates and theses is the theorisation of the spiritual cyborg: one who seeks to enhance their connection with the word and understanding of their place in it through connection with technology (Brasher, 2001; Davis, 1998; Gunkel, 2007). This concept, as an object

of study, has mutated in the short history of research into online religion, in which Højsgaard and Warburg (2005) have identified three “waves”. In this research a fourth “wave” is proposed, informed by recent developments in Internet technology and usage. In this fourth wave it is acknowledged that:

- going online is no longer a discrete step (Thomas, 2006);
- the Internet is also a window for the world to see the individual user, and not just the other way around (Thomas, 2006);
- research into religion online should not just consider what online content is religious and what is not, but what is religious about the project of creating online content (Lövheim, 2008); and
- the same research should not just consider online environments as peculiar religious spaces, but forums for considering the place of religion in all parts of life (Cheong, Halavais et al., 2008; Lövheim, 2008).

A sample of approximately thirty blog sites was chosen and articles posted in the periods 1 July – 31 October 2006 and 1 February – 31 May 2007 were collected, plus up to 28 days of comments after each post. Each blogger was invited to participate in an interview with the researcher, of whom 26 responded positively. Home pages at the end of each period were also stored for information about bloggers’ online personae not found in articles posted (including data on other blogs read and networks identified).

Informed by Marshall (2007) and Lövheim and Linderman (2005), the research understands that the construction of identity takes place in sites of social interaction in which there is sufficient social trust shared among its members. Etiquette practices, together with the proclamation and exchange of social trust, are often required for such trust to be generated. A discursive analysis is therefore employed to uncover etiquette practices among these bloggers and their commenting audience, and to identify what constitutes trust in the sample. A network analysis is undertaken

to explore connections between bloggers, according to links made in posts and comments.

Interviews offer more information about blogging purposes and practices otherwise unknown to the researcher.

Findings from this research may be summarised in terms of four paradoxes:

The Cyborg paradox

The blogosphere is valued as a place of safety, control and authentic expression. Bloggers find that the environment provides for a parliament on religious practices, symbols and doctrines. In this place is the potential to build an emerging church identity that places a premium value on incarnational mission in a new culture. The paradox lies in the search for a spirituality of embodiment that takes place in an environment devoid of bodies. This paradox calls for the adoption of new discursive practices and patterns of interaction, while maintaining a link to Christian tradition.

The network paradox

It is apparent that bloggers in the sample are far from a cohesive group. Many share more interactions with bloggers outside the sample, even outside the country, than with each other. The strength of online connections appears dependent on particular interests (like communities of practice) and on offline networks and environments (such as denominations), yet among them there is a call to define the emerging church in Australia as distinct from international expressions of the movement, particularly when these other groups are reported as representative of Australian emerging church bloggers. In this is an endeavour to discursively construct an Australian emerging church blogging community, while at the same time recognising that the emerging church values fluidity and diversity over conformity and structure.

The authority paradox

The rhetoric of democratisation is upheld in posts and conversations among bloggers in the sample. Debates about theology and church authority and structure often involve questions on what groups of people are “left out of the conversation”. Yet both discourse and network analyses show bloggers that are published in other media (newspapers and books) have more authority than others, and that public discourses are favoured over private ones. This has much to do with the socio-economic and professional status of bloggers in the sample, but also with the fact that, despite its audio-visual capabilities, blogging favours writing.

The “glocal” paradox

For bloggers in the sample the Internet is a tool for maintaining or enhancing connections originally made offline. Conversations in the blogosphere are useful primarily in that they relate to religious life offline as well as online. Despite the Internet’s facilitation of “me-centred” networks, and that safety and control that it provides in contrast to offline religious settings, bloggers hold to the ideal of intimate, localised communities and call others to bring their experience of these communities to the blogosphere, and take resources from the online experience back to their own settings.

2.0 Introduction

2.1 Cheryl

A lay minister in the Uniting Church and working in the Victorian-Tasmanian Synod offices in Melbourne, Cheryl was the first among her colleagues to start a weblog. Her position in the Synod involves connecting with individuals and groups to explore alternative forms of Christian worship and community building, and she hoped that her blog would offer a new way of connecting with people she may not otherwise have the opportunity to meet.

Apart from information about upcoming events, meetings and the discoveries of useful websites and other resources for people interested in exploring new forms of worship and spirituality, Cheryl's blog is also a diary of personal reflections. Her posts contain liturgies that she has prepared for use in different worship settings (often outside a traditional church setting, such as a prison or an art gallery), poetry she has found or has composed herself, or short prose on the daily inspirations and questions that find her at work (mostly found categorised under the title "random thoughts").

Cheryl writes with both frankness and diplomacy, but always with a fierce honesty. She finds herself living and working in a denomination whose charity and convictions have raised and sustained her, while also being part of a new modern world that traditional religion is failing to speak to. She finds the courage to write of sense of godlessness in working for the church at times, while finding solace in the places that seem so distant from Sunday-morning religious life. And she designs for herself a project of religious re-programming, of finding faith beyond the trappings of the church's public image, to even plead "God, rid us of God..." (Cheryl, 23 March 2007)¹.

¹ Cheryl (2007). "fundamentalists anonymous." [*hold :: this space*]. Posted 23 March 2007.

Her audience feeds her a wide range of responses, and she receives messages from co-workers about her blog with some trepidation. She has been labelled a heretic, and that does not seem to offend her. Instead she replies, “[Christianity] is a story that’s formed me, and there are parts of it that define me better than anything else, but it’s not the whole of my story” (Cheryl, 15 March 2007)².

“Emerging church” is a tag Cheryl wears reluctantly, if only in that she finds such labels constraining (“definitions are so definite, and I’m anything but” (Cheryl, 15 March 2007)³). She accepts, however, that this is one tag that others place on her blog, if only in that it helps her connect with other bloggers who are exploring similar ideas, concerns and project undertakings. She finds she doesn’t quite fit in with the Australian emerging church blogging circle, and enjoys greater connection with like bloggers in the United Kingdom.

For this blogger, however, the best connections are those made with locals who contact her by phone or email at the office. Thanks in part to her online presence, and in part to a column she’s been given in a Melbourne newspaper, she has the opportunity to meet in the real world people who, like Cheryl, are finding the distance between church life and the real world more difficult to traverse, who are finding themselves on the margins of their faith community. That she is approached by these for assistance in finding a new way in living an expressing their faith, fuels her to keep writing with honesty, humility and vulnerability, and stay heretical.

2.2 Emerging church bloggers in Australia

This thesis will delve into and expound the ongoing identity project of emerging church bloggers in Australia. The goal will be approached from two perspectives. Firstly, this thesis will explore

² Cheryl (2007). "sidesliding." [*hold :: this space*]. Posted 15 March 2007.

³ Cheryl (2007). "sidesliding." [*hold :: this space*]. Posted 15 March 2007.

how those involved in the emerging church movement use blogging to construct individual religious identities. Secondly, relationships between participants in the Australian emerging church blogging community will be studied to determine how an emerging church identity is constructed within the “blogosphere” (a colloquial term referring to all blogs currently active online). Both angles will work to address the following research question:

How do those involved in the emerging church conversation use blogging technology to construct individual and communal online religious identities?

The research begins from the premise that identity on the Internet is a discursive construction. Moreover, it assumes that identity construction is a reflexive process that undergoes continuous formation through relationships, and that, at least online, these relationships are also discursively constructed. Thus discourse analysis will be the main method of analysis for this research. How bloggers consider their relationship to their computers, the Internet, blogging and its software, other bloggers, the emerging church movement, Christianity, church and society will all be considered as acts of discourse, through which their understanding of themselves in relations to these partners will emerge.

Other methods of analysis will also be used. Tools of network analysis will be employed to uncover how bloggers are connected to produce an Australian emerging church blogosphere, inside a global network. Interviews with bloggers will be conducted to uncover information about the bloggers, their attitudes toward and aspirations about the Internet and the blogosphere, and online behaviours not seen in their published work.

This thesis will provide insights into the following secondary questions:

1. How do religious attitudes towards the Internet and blogging contribute to the way people interact online?
2. What contributions and constraints do blogging software, and people’s use of it, offer the construction of online identity?

3. How are bloggers working together to construct an emerging church theology, ecclesiology and missiology?
4. How is authority distributed among emerging church bloggers, in relation to other systems of authority both online and offline?
5. What can be said about the place of the emerging church blogosphere in the current tensions of 21st century Australian religious sociology?

This research is placed within a short but well-established tradition of research into religion online. A broader ambition of this thesis will be to address concerns that are current among researchers in the field, and propose new directions for research into religion online for the next decade.

2.3 The new world of Web 2.0

One afternoon in 2006, frustration and anger got the better of the Dean of Melbourne's St Patrick's Cathedral. He stormed out of his cloister, and used all the strength in his voice and gestures to move away a group of young people who had been loitering and skating on the church's grounds. The young people reciprocated, apparently entertained by the old man's loss of composure. An argument ensued, and the priest resorted to racist and slanderous abuse against the group (McMahon, 2007).

Would not this event have been recorded on one of the group's mobile camera, it would have fallen into obscurity, joining so many other ignored urban battles young people experience often in Australian cities. But in July 2007 it was discovered on YouTube, a popular video-file sharing site, by both domestic and overseas mainstream media journalists. The Dean's displayed behaviour attracted criticism from the general public, and, despite the support of his colleagues in the archdiocese, he felt forced to resign from his post at the cathedral. (Zwartz, 2007)

This event highlights the power of new web technologies in re-shaping the religious media environment. The phrase, Web 2.0, was first coined by Tim O'Reilly and John Battelle to describe

a new set of Internet applications such as social networking sites, wikis, file sharing networks, folksonomies, and syndication sites. Social networking sites include websites such as Myspace and Facebook, where users create their own personal web pages in order to create and maintain connections with other users. Wikis are sites that allow for “collaborative authoring”, i.e. data input and editing from many authors in any location. File sharing networks include sites like Flickr and YouTube, where users offer still images and videos (respectively) for storage and free distribution among other users. Folksonomies (“folk taxonomies”) are websites like Technorati and Delicious, where “tags” are employed by the sites’ users to collect, order and reference information found elsewhere on the World Wide Web. Syndication sites, or “feeds”, are data streams that appear in a range of web sites, like weblogs and wikis. They contain data read by web-based programs (like Bloglines.com and Google Reader) in order to alert users to new information published on their host sites. A user can create an account on Google Reader and list the location of the syndication feeds of all the weblogs the user likes to read. Google Reader will then alert the user when new information is posted on the weblogs.

These new systems of online information storage and sharing represent a new step in the evolution of online technology, communication and culture. Ten years ago, as Internet connections started to become commonplace in Australian households, online communication accessible to the ordinary user was limited to email, news groups, instant messaging and chat rooms designed by outside operators. Personal web pages were created by only those who had some time to learn basic HTML script, and some money to buy web space through their Internet service provider (ISP). These pages were fairly static; any change to web content required the author to download the page from the site to a local computer, edit it and send it back.

Audiences, or users, of online content were separated by its producers by technical knowledge, access to online storage space, time and money.

Now web-based applications allow users to create and store information online without as much need for knowledge of HTML and other web languages or the purchase of web storage space.

Web 2.0 applications allow ordinary users to create personal web pages, contribute to the creation of online content on group pages, store information online free of charge, and even create systems of online ordering and retrieval.

The factors that paved the way for the increasing use and availability of these applications include:

1. Increased access to high-speed data connections, which has prompted demand for the flow of large media files
2. Increased ownership of mobile media production technologies, including mobile phones with still and motion cameras, which have allowed users of Web 2.0 technologies to upload media to these sites.
3. Raised awareness and diminished trust of media corporations that provide the bulk of news and information sites, and a desire for alternative sites of news.

Considering these factors, Web 2.0 may be seen as a challenge to the institutional structure of information distribution in our society, or even a revolutionary act. The buzz words that are often associated with Web 2.0 are *producers* and *democratisation*. In the rhetoric of Web 2.0, the producers of online content are not separated from their audiences. It is claimed in the rhetoric that they are members of the same group. People logging on to YouTube or Facebook to check for new information are using the same sites in the same way as those logging on to offer their own video or music creations. The audiences of YouTube and Facebook consist of both users and producers of the sites' contents (though recent research suggests less than twenty per cent of users of these sites offer uploaded content, offering a challenge to the rhetoric (see van Dijck, 2009)).

Web 2.0 applications provide alternative settings for the sharing of information that may be rejected, downplayed or ignored by mainstream media platforms. Never before has the Internet had the potential to raise the awareness of issues that are important to audiences not recognised by mainstream media producers. Web 2.0 offers a glimpse of a utopian vision where control of the flow of information is taken from large communication corporations and given back to the public.

Bryan Murley likens the arrival of Web 2.0 with the modern Protestant theological campaign of “the priesthood of all believers”. Just as the Reformation challenged the 16th century Catholic premise that God is available to the laity only through the priest, the new web challenges the presumption that information is only available to the public through media organisations and their journalists. As in Luther’s campaign that no intermediary is needed to communicate with God, new Internet applications allow direct access to find and contribute to the flow of information in society. (Murley, 2005)

While Murley does not want to draw too large an analogy between Web 2.0 and Christ as “the bridge” between information and public, and God and humanity, his thesis does highlight the claim that these new Internet technologies are ideological in nature. Where some media scholars argue that no new technology enters society without some sort of moral or ideological value, they see Web 2.0 being embraced by people who seek a change in the current system of information distribution and control.

Weblogs, known more conveniently as blogs, are by far the most popular manifestation of Web 2.0. According to a 2006 press release by Technorati, in that year the blogosphere contained approximately 57 million sites, and the number was growing by 100,000 daily (Sifry, 2006). Last year, Technorati’s “About” page claims those numbers are 112.8 million and 175,000, respectively (Technorati, 2008).

Blogs have emerged in the last decade to become an important vehicle for self-publishing and expression online. Blogging was introduced in 1999 as a platform by which personal web pages could easily be updated, without having to edit the entire page. Users would enter text that would appear as “posts,” arranged in reverse chronological order, so that the web page would resemble an online journal, made publicly available on the Net. Over time, new features were added to the blogging platform, which facilitated the conversational element of this medium. “Comments” features enabled readers of blog pages to respond to posts with their own opinions, starting a conversation between blog authors (“bloggers”) and their audiences via entire threads of interactions recorded online. “Permalinks” allowed posts and their ensuing comments to have their own URL, thereby enabling bloggers to refer back to a previous article via these links. “Tagging” allowed bloggers to assign one or more keywords to a blog post that could later be sorted by topic for readers. These features also allowed search engines to identify and collect the permalinks and tags of multiple bloggers’ posts so they could be easily sorted and accessed by readers. Technorati, a search engine that collects information from blog pages and arranges them according to tags, made blog posts further accessible to a wider audience. The search engine also allows posts to be ranked by popularity, or “authority,” as determined by the number of permalinks published on other blogs within a given time period (Blood, 2004; Bortree, 2005; Kumar, Novak et al., 2004). These features became important tools to help facilitate online conversation as well as to analyze the influence of blogging conversation in society.

These new additions to the technology have enabled blogs to evolve from a simple web publishing tool to a global social networking platform, where each blog page becomes a site for interaction between multiple users and where issues of public interest can be explored and discussed across a multitude of sites, offering a wide range of opinions and perspectives. Thus, in the last decade the blogosphere has rapidly emerged as an important alternative source of information, challenging the power of institutional media and the authority of voices that are prominent therein (Beer and Burrows, 2007; Efimova and de Moor, 2005).

The blog is, in its simplest form, an online diary, a collection of articles (or posts), organised in reverse chronological order. The diary page is powered by a blogging program which allows the user to enter new information without having to edit and republish the entire site. Blogger, WordPress and LiveJournal are among the most popular blogging software programs, which allow users with limited knowledge of web design to produce individual blogs either on the users' own site or on the program's server. Most of these blog programs are free of charge.

Blogs don't exist in isolation from each other. As authors read books, so bloggers also read others' blogs. Bloggers respond to comments made about their posts. They publish lists of their favourite bloggers on their blog's front page or sidebar. They make references to posts on other blogs, with hyperlinks so readers can follow conversations occurring over multiple sites. Bloggers recognise they are part of a blogging community, recognise common blogging etiquette and rules of behaviour, work to build friendships and relationships of collegiality and trust with other writers.

What impact can be seen of blogging and Web 2.0 on religion? Since the Internet became a household name, people have used the World Wide Web for religious purposes. Users have joined chat rooms to talk about how to make relevant and inclusive worship spaces. They've subscribed to email lists to connect with people of the same denomination across the globe. They've read online magazines that criticise the actions of bishops and priests. Churches have made web pages displaying photos of our buildings and published their pastors' contact details and preaching times. Users have joined newsgroups seeking alternative forms of spiritual practice. Almost every form of religious community in the offline world has had a counterpart form on the web, where people congregate to pray together, worship together, discuss social justice and theology, write songs and make art, make community and care for one another.

If these original online, or "Oldweb", gathering spaces as "online churches", then blogs can be likened to "online house churches". While the email lists, newsgroups and chat rooms of Oldweb were constructed by religious groups and organisations, whose moderators were relatively

faceless and impersonal, blogs have become meeting points where the host is only too keen to let him or herself be known, to welcome the user into “his/her own space”. And while email lists and chat rooms had relatively few links to other online places, bloggers are only too eager to show you which other house churches they attend, invite you to join them there, and give you directions. The network of blogs becomes a neighbourhood of house churches, where bloggers and audiences meet in different places, even at the same time.

Sociologists, theologians, and cultural theorists involved in the fifteen year old tradition of research into religion online have always debated about the future of Christianity, and whether the Internet will lead to church revivals or to the ultimate demise of organised religion. Many now agree that online forms of religious community serve more as a complement than as a replacement to religious expression and communion in the offline world. For many Internet users, the virtual provides a space to explore new forms of religious expression that can be carried into life offline, and for them the virtual church offers a glimpse for what “real” church could be like. For the same people, however, there are elements of “real” church that cannot be replicated online. So they seek a harmony in their online and offline religious experiences. Just as the letters of Paul the apostle provided a means for promoting a religious identity beyond the local sect, and as the printing press facilitated Papal authority through the dissemination of a uniform catechesis, the Internet provides another layer of social and cultural communication in which religious identity and belonging is explored, promoted and debated.

The use of Web 2.0 technologies, and particularly blogging, for constructing online religious identities and communities, does highlight areas of interest when considering how Australian Christianity may look in the next decade:

2.3.1 The discursive construction of religious identity

In post-structuralism lies the claim that all identities are the product of discursive construction, framed by social conventions and rules that are grounded in ideologies and structures of power.

Early investigations into social relations online (for example, Rheingold, 1995; Slevin, 2000; Turkle, 1996) have suggested that the Internet provides a space devoid of such structures, relegating power instead to the users who alone become the agents of their identity. Similar to the production of home pages, the act of blogging is the act of online identity construction. With great agency, bloggers, in their sharing of religious experiences, debates on doctrine and reflections on the works of religious writers and artists, explicitly negotiate the labels and discursive practices encountered in their offline religious life, to work out a place for themselves as a new kind of Christian in a new world.

However, not unlike the rules, rituals, etiquettes and language that one learns when joining a local church, the blogosphere contains its own sets of discursive practices that inform and guide producers and respondents to blog material. Religious bloggers learn, adopt, promote, challenge and adapt these practices according to their religious sensitivities, and vice versa.

2.3.2 Not a community, a network

Even in Oldweb, social relations can be mapped according to certain centres of engagement, such as an email group, chat room or online social group. The blogosphere lacks such centre; each blog is a site for engagement, and each blogger has their own unique set of relations with other bloggers. No two bloggers enter the environment in the same place, or meets the same group of people online. On the one hand, the blogosphere is free from the constraints imposed from religious organisations who establish Oldweb sites for religious community (but not from those of the makers of blogging software). On the other hand, any more “formal” organisation or activity that arises out of blog-based networking must not stay in the blogosphere.

2.3.3 Nothing is private

In an article for *Continuum*, Cohen considers the questions, “Are bloggers narcissistic?” and concludes that only in that there is a certain divide between private and public discourses could bloggers be considered as such, by thrusting private conversations into the public sphere.

Moreover, bloggers don't make the private public, but reject the divide that has been in place in Western culture (Cohen, 2006: 166). All discourses in the blogosphere are public, regardless of their content, form or intended audience. We can only assume that the daily prayer regimen of an elderly woman living in The Kimberley would have the same "exposure" to a potential audience as the carefully researched and meticulously worded theological treatise of an urban archbishop.

Ideologies of gender, age, education and ordination in Australian churches have determined who is in a position to speak of religion in the public sphere. The blurring of the divide between public and private discourses may lead to doubt regarding the stability of these positions and the ideologies that support them.

2.3.4 Who practises religion anymore?

As the YouTube incident, described above, illustrates, even the hidden lives of clergy are vulnerable to exposure. Those who practise religion publicly, who create content for religious media (whether that is the pulpit, the bound book or the television) must now acknowledge that their congregation members, their audiences, their consumers, can produce religious material with equal ease and for a comparable audience. The arrival of Web 2.0, coupled with the rising use of mobile media technologies, suggests that a redefinition of not just the public/private dichotomy be made, but also dichotomies of producer/consumer, performer/audience, and practitioner/congregation.

How these challenges and opportunities are approached by emerging church bloggers is the focus of this study.

3.0 Literature review

The aim of this chapter is three-fold. It will survey relevant literature in fields of research, and identify key emphases and themes alongside which this research may be placed. Secondly, it will identify key questions and concerns evident in the literature toward which this research may offer a contribution. It will lastly outline ideas and theses from the literature that provide a conceptual framework upon which the methodology of this research is built. A brief history of Christianity in Australia will lead into a survey of literature on theories of secularisation in Western society, upon which research into the development of the emerging church movement is founded. Then key emphases in new media research will be highlighted, followed by important concerns in the growing field of research into media, religion and culture. At this point a case will be made for this research's contributions to questions and concerns coming out of both fields.

3.1 Christianity in Australia, secularisation, and the emerging church

The aim of this section is to provide an overview of Australian Christianity for the purpose of locating the emerging church phenomenon within Australian Christian history. It will not offer a full engagement with the various issues that could be addressed in a comprehensive historical thesis of Christianity in the country. The primary source has been the work of Australian historian Ian Breward, complemented by other national and international sources.

The Christian churches have sat in an uneasy place in Australian society, ever since Europeans arrived to the continent in the eighteenth century. It took many years, and much pressure from immigrants, for British churches to consider the communities of convicts, emancipists and free settlers as mission fields (Breward, 1988: 1). Rather than conscientious opposition that grew in

North American societies, it was apathy that halted the establishment of a national Church in the colonies.

The same apathy allowed for the growth of religious diversity and the development of a unique religious character for the land that would be a nation. Colonial governments supported the importation of both Protestant and Roman Catholic clergy and professionals to build charities for migrants and freed convicts, the majority of whom were Irish Catholics (Breward, 1988: 11, 13). The copper and gold boom of the mid 1800s attracted both miners and evangelists who gained followers more by their practical piety than formal theological education. It was in this period that Methodist and Baptist churches grew rapidly, by the deployment of lay preachers (Breward, 1988: 28). Finke and Stark notice a similar expansion in the history of the United States' expansion. In the absence of an established national church, as in Europe, religious diversity thrived and the growth of denominational communities were fuelled by a process akin to market forces: those that grew were those that could provide religious products that the wider community would be attracted to consume (Finke and Stark, 2005: 15-20).

Even this early in the history of White Australia, common sense pointed to an ecumenical Christian presence, if at least a common Protestantism. Anglicans, Presbyterians and Wesleyans shared resources to build churches in marginal areas, including the support of clergy (Breward, 1988: 23-24). This common sense survived into the next century, where a federated Australia saw the union of all Lutheran churches (previously divided by ethnic origins), a Baptist Union, and an Australian Anglican General Synod (Breward, 1988: 66). Even Methodism, Congregationalism, and most Presbyterian communities were lost to a Uniting Church in Australia.

It is argued that this ecumenical sensibility fuelled the separation of church from state in the nation's development. For example, a passion for justice united Christians to the campaign of state-funded education in the second half of the nineteenth century, which led to the dissolution of most Protestant schools. It could have ended all sectarianism, but it paved the way for a

Roman Catholic system that aimed for a religious alternative to secularist education, and then new Protestant schools that aimed for prestige and refinement (Breward, 1988: 32-33). The same passion in Christian community service led to the ideal that the professional skill is more important than the religious affiliation of service agencies' staff, and would eventually mean the independence of many from their Christian roots (Breward, 1988: 86-87). Examples include the Brotherhood of St Lawrence, Mission Australia and the Australian Workers Union. Even organisations that carry a denominational label, such as Anglicare and UnitingCare, ensure the culture of the workplace remains primarily secular, even where chaplains are employed.

Against the historical backdrop of consensual secularism and latent ecumenism, the middle of the twentieth century saw a convergence of various global social and political factors that led to a watershed in Australian religious history, among the effects of which the Australian emerging church now sees itself. These include, but are not exhausted by, the Billy Graham crusades, the Second Vatican Council, the arrival of television, the Asian Wars, the World Council of Churches, the Death of God, and communism.

Evangelical crusades and revivals have been with Australians since before the Gold Rush. They focussed on simple pragmatic doctrines balanced by fervour for community harmony and service. Evangelists were often gifted with more charisma than formal education, and understood the plight of their congregations. Billy Graham entered Australia with the same properties, but his style led to a new flavour of Evangelicalism that would be the key characteristic for Evangelicalism in that century and the next. Graham's works had earned him many devotees in North America, and arrived down under with a large capital outlay to produce large musical and dramatic events in our capital cities, that drew unusually large crowds (Breward, 1988: 77). With Graham came the idea that the spectacle is as important as the message.

Graham's crusade, like other evangelistic pursuits to follow, was worded in the language of new media of the period, television.

As television became the dominant form of mass media in Western culture, the late twentieth century saw both religious and secular polities increasingly submissive to its discursive structure. Television was, as it still is, a medium packed with stories of good versus evil, where even journalism shows contain a narrative and ritual structure that is filled with drama. The Evangelical Gospel found a comfortable place among the messages beamed into homes of this period.

Australian broadcasting regulations of the 1960s onwards allowed a space for religious programming, even if it were just among the screening of commercials. Mainstream Protestant and Catholic churches lacked a voice of authority for the new media environment, and struggled with how to approach it ethically and structurally (Lehikoinen, 2003: 165). The Christian Television Association was developed to deal with these issues on the behalf of the major denominations, and became a well-known Christian presence in Australian television, until regulations were relaxed in the 1990s, making Christian broadcasts more expensive, having to compete for air-time in the same way as other community and commercial organisations. Now the newly named Christian Television Australia focuses its resources on a digital channel, with rarely run special programmes on free-to-air.

It seems now that the once-small Evangelical Christian voice is the great winner in Australian broadcasting deregulation. Its energies are not wasted by the strict authority regimes and ethical debates that confronted the mainstream churches (Lehikoinen, 2003: 165-166). American televangelism, such as the ministries of Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson, Marilyn Hickey and Benny Hinn, had enough resources to buy air time on Australian television. Their common message was the Bible is given directly by God and so must be read with a literal eye, that prayer brings rewards to the true believer, who is persecuted by a secular world unprotected from Satan's influence, and is called to bring moral regeneration until the end of days, which are imminent. Though a very marginal Christian worldview, the rituals contained within the television

programming, together with the ritual acts adopted by its consumers, helped legitimate the religious identity of viewers as part of a global movement (Alexander, 1994: 3-5).

Evangelical Christianity has, since Billy Graham, been seen as a rapidly growing movement with a strong successful voice in Australian society. Television has helped, not just by carrying the message, but by reinforcing the shape of the Australian religious milieu as a market, where religious identity is built by consumption, and where the success of an organisation is dependent, albeit somewhat, on the marketability of its products. This is indeed the basis of criticism of Australia's "megachurches", such as Hillsong in Sydney and Adelaide's Paradise Church, labelled by some in the emerging church movement as more akin to businesses than religious communities.

Television is not the only transforming force of changes in Australia's Christian landscape in the mid and late twentieth century. While ecumenical activities engaged dialogue between established denominations with increasing fervour, political debates asked Christians to take sides, producing divides within denominational structures. Whatever differences divided Christians into Catholics and Protestants would become less important than those that defined a "left-wing" and a "right-wing", or a Liberal versus a Conservative Christian.

The Second Vatican Council spanned three years and involved two Popes, ending in 1965. It changed the face of the Roman Catholic Church, opening its doors to alternative methods of theological inquiry, greater freedoms of expression for congregational brothers and sisters, and interest in inter-denominational and inter-faith dialogue. In response to its global power, Catholics in Australia found a seat in the Australian Council of Churches (now known as the National Council of Churches in Australia) and involvement in joint theological training organisations, such as the United Faculty of Theology and the Melbourne College of Divinity. Economic prosperity, social mobility, free education and urban sprawl since the 1950s closed distances between Catholics and Protestants in both geography and class. Pure Catholic families

were growing at a slower rate, inter-denominational marriages were becoming normal. (Breward, 1993: 67)

But one Papal Encyclical would cause a disagreement among Catholics, creating a divide that is not yet resolved. *Humanae Vitae*, subtitled “On the Regulation of Birth” was written by Pope Paul VI and released in 1968, reaffirming traditional teaching and unequivocally condemning contraception and abortion. Many Catholics began to question the infallibility of the Papacy, and clergy met those confessing to the sin of using contraception with acknowledgment that it was a matter of personal conscience (Breward, 1988: 73).

In Australia as in other parts of the world, political movements engaged and divided Christians. These movements would include the anti-war movement and feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, environmentalism and the gay and lesbian rights movement of the 1980s and 1990s. Wuthnow (1989: 32-34) describes the distinction between pro and con among believers as arising out of a perceived gap between political values and behaviour. So-called liberal Christians attacked the behaviour of government while conservatives critiqued values. Conservatives wanted out of political involvement, focussing more on changing personal beliefs, while liberals saw this was not enough for the Church’s witness to the world.

Increased access to higher education and the mobility of these educated from the locality of their upbringing, allowed people born after World War II to engage in questions of religion and religious authority. Not surprising then, that 1963 saw the peak of participation in traditional religious communities in Australia. The Death of God movement of the 1960s, informed by the works of Barth and Bonhoeffer, led in part by the 1963 publication of *Honest to God*, written by John Robinson, then Anglican Bishop of Woolwich, criticised contemporary Christian theology and claimed that while traditional images of God were absent in the secular world, a sense of the sacred can no longer be found among the cloisters of the Church (Altizer and Hamilton, 1966: 28-36, 39). Instead, a more authentic Christian way of life is seen in engagement with people outside

the Church. Radical liberal groups, including the Australian Student Christian Movement, claimed the failure of Australia's mainline churches to listen to and speak to the world, calling them to abandon futile moral laws and turn their attention to service and justice (Breward, 1993: 169; Thompson, 1994: 123).

While Liberal Christians laid their attacks on the Church for distancing itself from society, in later decades radical Conservatives set their aim for governments. From 1965 through the eighties, State governments had progressively freed community laws from Protestant morality, including restrictions to hours of licensed venues, the legalisation of betting and establishments of State lotteries, legalisation of abortion and decriminalisation of homosexuality. In response to a perceived downward spiral into “hedonistic secularism” the Festival of Light grew into a major conservative pressure group campaign. Born in South Australia, it grasped a larger stronghold in Sydney, where even now conservatives appear to have a stronger voice, in a State where church attendance, according to Thompson, is generally lower and amidst greater religious diversity than national averages (Thompson, 1994: 116-118).

In later decades, organisations such as Catch the Fire Ministries and the Australian Prayer Networks would do well to catch the attention of state and federal politicians in their claims for a presence of Christian spirit and fervour in the running of the country. Some Christians organised themselves into political parties, calling for Australia's moral and spiritual renewal, and a return to “family values”. Such parties include Family First and the Christian Democratic Party. Due partly to the strong presence of Evangelical churches in mainstream media, prominent politicians have found in them a support for a conservative agenda, not least the country's previous Prime Minister, the Hon John Howard, and Treasurer, the Hon Peter Costello. Mainstream news media has responded to politicians' interest in these groups, to turn their own attention to religious debates happening in denominations and the impact on Australian life. The place of religion in political life, especially in the face of a growing Muslim immigrant and refugee population, and

terrorism post-9/11, is a popular article for consideration by any radio or television news program.

It is increasingly apparent that in more recent times Australians define the Christian identity less by their involvement in a denomination and more by their stance on a variety of political, religious and social issues, like abortion, sexual morality, the ordination of women and homosexuals, stem-cell research and our responsibility to the environment. People draw from a large market of sources for resources to form religious identity, outside their local religious community and its parent denominational authority. These views are still dividing people within traditional institutional structures and encouraging alliances among previously separated groups.

In 2005, Australian church organisations pooled finances together and employed an advertising agency to create a series of radio and television commercials, plus a website that offered information about the communities and its people. The advertising campaign was titled “Jesus – all about life” and featured young adults, parents and older people expressing their interest in the person of Jesus Christ. Every television and radio advertisement intentionally omitted any reference to the churches involved, and even Christianity itself. For the first time in Australian media, Christians refused to portray themselves in their religious promotion. Only in the website was there a small reference to Australian Christian churches, and only links to their own denominational website and contact information.

The ad campaign showed a realisation that Australians were, by-and-large, indifferent to Christian identity and community though had some interest in faith and spirituality. It made apparent that denominations themselves know the Australian religious community is not defined by institutional membership or participation.

Recent reports from the National Church Life Survey (Bellamy and Castle, 2004: 8-10) show that in the last decade of the twentieth century church attendance in Australia was in steady decline. In

2001, 8.8% of the Australian population attended church services weekly, compared to 9.9% in 1996. Monthly attendance also fell from 20% in 1998 to 18.6% in 2002. Between 1991 and 2001, Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian and Salvation Army denominations closed between 2 and 9 per cent of their total congregations. The Uniting Church closed 22% of theirs, though in this decade there was an official reform of the term “congregation” as a statistical definition. In contrast, congregations belonging to the Apostolic churches, the Assemblies of God and the Church of the Nazarene grew by between 27 and 67 per cent. While these figures may suggest some Christians are moving from Catholic and mainstream Protestant to Evangelical churches, research shows these churches (such as the Assemblies of God, the Christian City Churches and the Christian Revival Crusade) have the highest incidence of “drifting out”, i.e. of people leaving these churches and forsaking church attendance altogether (Sterland, Powell et al., 2006: 12-13).

3.1.1 Theorising secularisation and the emerging church

Weber, a founding contributor to the sociology of religion, perceives secularisation in Western societies as the phenomenon where religious values and recommended behaviours are set against those of the secular world (i.e. institutions and settings outside of religious institutions like the churches), to the extent where a dichotomy is seen between sacred and profane spheres of social life. Weber does not view secularization as a logical historical process or a step in the West’s social evolution. Rather, he prefers to see it as an empirical social fact, that is the effect of other forces of change in modern society. (Hughey, 1979: 86-89)

In fact, Weber tends to write less about secularisation as a concept than he does of “intellectualisation” and “disenchantment”. He claims that when values between the religious and secular worlds are set against each other, compromises need to be made. One such compromise is the communication and exchange of religious values in secular terms within the public sphere. This, Weber suggests, has been the fate of the Protestant work ethic, which has been subsumed into the ethics of capitalism. Another is the rejection of values and behaviours in

the public sphere, but an allowance for them to be communicated and exchanged in certain social spaces that are deemed not public. An example would be the removal of communal prayer in schools, but a recognition of the freedom to pray, or even the encouragement to do so, in homes and places of worship. Thus in Western society the process of secularisation has involved the “privatisation” of religion.

Weber claims the main cause of such privatisation in the rationalisation of public discourse, that places value on empiricism and rational science over irrational claims of supernatural and divine interventions in history. The decline in church attendance in Western nations, according to Weber’s thesis, is a product of the rationalisation of discourse in secular institutions, including education, politics and business. Modern life in the West is disenchanted with the irrational and mystical behaviours and speeches of religious institutions, and people seek alternative settings and discourses for discerning meaning and purpose. (see Bauman, 1998; Hughey, 1979)

While this thesis may account for European nations in the twentieth century and later, writers such as Casanova contend that it cannot explain for the steady high incidence of church participation in the United States of America, or countries in Asia and South America where modernisation is met with growth in attendance at Protestant Christian churches. For Casanova, the “privatisation” of religion is not the result of a disenchanted modern people, or the removal of religious speech in favour of rational, empirical or scientific discourse. Rather it is the product of an ideological campaign of modernity, both for freedom of conscience from ecclesial control, and for the progression of institutional differentiation for the capitalist economy (1994: 40-42). Casanova sees the persistence of the churches to maintain a presence in the public sphere as not a resistance to secularisation but a “deprivatisation” of religion in moral response to capitalism, consumerist worldviews or their threats to traditional worldviews (1994: 228).

Turner's secularisation theory aligns with that of Casanova in that he sees the privatisation of religion as the result of the modernist campaign to relegate institutions founded on "ineffable" truths to the private sphere for the benefit of modern democracy and liberty.

In a democratic environment, the very idea that some truths are ineffable contradicts the ethos of modern society in which everybody assumes a right to understand or at least to have the relevant information. Democracy tends to promote plain speech and political campaigns are based on personalities and slogans and not only policies. The control of ineffable knowledge is compromised and the whole idea of hierarchically organized wisdom evaporates. We are moving from the age of revelation to the age of information where everything is, at least in principle, effable. The resulting crisis of authority is perhaps the real meaning of secularization [...]. (2008: 221)

He departs from Casanova's theory in his understanding of the re-entrance of Christianity in the public sphere. For Turner, modern public religion is "low-intensity", favouring the practical, attractive and therapeutic at the expense of "authentic and viable forms of personal piety" (2008: 232). Even religion that appears to challenge consumer culture, like Fundamentalism, enters the public sphere as a marketplace, "selling a lifestyle based on special diets, alternative education, health regimes and mentalities" (2008: 233). Even if (post)modern, individualist, and consumerist society has allowed religion to speak its values, it has determined the conditions on which it can communicate.

The emerging church movement is seen in the context of religious "deprivatisation" and the conditions with which Christianity is allowed a public face. Driscoll (2006) identifies the emerging church movement as the third and last in a series of models, based on their level of engagement in the public sphere. Traditional expressions of Christianity, such as Catholicism and mainstream

Protestantism, are labelled “Church 1.0”, that claim to retain their privileged place in modern culture, though have failed to retain an authoritative voice in postmodern culture. “Church 2.0”, appealing to public audiences and engaging in a “culture war” to regain the lost position of cultural privilege, and managed as businesses that market spiritual goods and services (Driscoll, 2006: 87-88).

The emerging church is model “3.0”, that accepts in a postmodern and pluralistic society the “culture war” is won only at the expense of authentic spirituality, and therefore not worth fighting (Driscoll, 2006: 88). For Brian McLaren, a popular American voice of the movement, the emerging church seeks an alternative to the secular dilemma, where Christians choose either “a private, personal spirituality unconnected to public life” or “a public civil religion that compromises with partisan politics” (Streett, 2006: 11).

3.2.2 The emerging church in the context of postmodernism

As will be shown in subsequent sections, those involved in the emerging church conversation in blogs identify as “postmodern” Christians. The term “postmodern” is an adjective of “postmodernity”, which refers to a historical period that is perhaps better described as “late modernity”, i.e. the last few decades of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century. It is also an adjective for “postmodernism”, which is difficult to define, but is often used in reference to recent movements in art, literature, popular culture, politics and philosophy, that aligns with some or all of the following characteristics:

1. A rejection of the “grand narrative”, i.e. the notion that society is on a path of constant progress in wealth and well-being
2. A rejection of the pursuit of truth that is found in an encyclopaedic knowledge of the universe

3. A rhizomatised consideration of different perspectives, especially in narrative writing, that highlights both the fallacy of omniscient narration, and the voices of marginal characters (see Lucente, 1991)
4. Bricolage, that is, the placement of a text (such as writing, sound or visual art) alongside texts of other genres, movements or time periods, in order to change the meaning or value of the text (see Crimp, 1998: 51)
5. An embrace of the post-structuralist notion that all claims to knowledge are bound by structures of power, including those of social institutions. As such, institutions such as family, religion, science, government and even gender, are not static, but undergo fluid change (see Bauman, 1998)

Postmodernism, as embodied in art and literature, seeks to blur distinctions between high and low culture, exposing and challenging the ideologies that create these distinctions. In popular culture, postmodernism favours the reproduction and re-presentation of images and texts, to undermine notions of originality and authenticity (Crimp, 1998: 61). According to Barrett, postmodernism:

trouble[s] and threaten[s] once very stable and intuitively accepted Western notions of an authentic, individual, free, creative “self.” In Postmodern works of theory and artworks, “the self” becomes willingly or unwillingly aware of “the other,” of “difference,” and of what counts as “good.” Any former “must” in “the truth” of statements has been rattled for those aware of and open to Postmodern ideas and ideals. Postmodern ideas can be very destabilizing to long-held ways of viewing the self, the other, the world, and what is true. (2008: 197)

For Moritz (2008: 30-32), emerging churches are seen to be rooted in postmodernism, as is noticed by the following properties:

1. A recognition and rejection of modernist dichotomies such as matter/spirit, truth/value, science/religion and sacred/secular
2. A recognition that individualism and consumerism are forces of alienation in urban society and contemporary Christianity
3. A desire to retrieve and re-present ancient liturgical and devotional practices that reflect authentic community living
4. Valuing multi-media, multi-sensory communal worship
5. A disdain for systematic theology

More is written for the emerging church movement than about it, from the perspectives of ecclesial, moral and practical theology (see, for example, Frost and Hirsch, 2003; McLaren, 2004; Tickle, 2008). However this research here is about emerging bloggers rather than the movement itself. This researcher will focus more on bloggers' reading of, and responses to, these pieces of literature than the works themselves. The remainder of this chapter will, among other things, show how media are the agents setting the conditions with which religion is "deprivatised". What follows is how previous studies in new media and their relation to religion and culture offer some ground for this research venture.

3.2 Internet and new media research

New media (including Internet) research finds a place in many disciplines within the social sciences and humanities. Caldwell (2000: 12) generalises the expanse of research into five "genres": economic theory, that generally sees technologies as benign or value-less and are approached with utilitarian methods of evaluation; "apocalyptic tradition" theory, that see technology as a threat to humane society (see Marty, 2000; McKibben, 1990; Postman, 1985); socio-economic theory, that explores relationships between technology and production, distribution and professional practice, and would be found in schools of education, politics,

communication, commerce and law (see Lanham, 1993; Manovich, 2001; Soukup, 2000; Yakhlef, 2009); “grand narrative” theory, that involves speculative philosophical, ethical and ideological analysis (see Ess, 1966; Silverstone, 2007); and sociology and ethnography, that explore how new media exist in lived social spaces and are used in the construction of identities (see Hine, 2000; Matheson, 2005; White, 2007).

This research is placed quite squarely in this fifth “genre”, endeavouring to make a contribution to the field of sociology, if we take Talcott Parson’s definition of the term, as the “study of action and interaction” that considers interaction as “an exchange of meaning, in which actors have to interpret the symbolic media of exchange in order to make sense of any communication” (Turner, 2008: 222). This research will consider the exchange of meaning that occurs in communication between actors in and through the Internet, as well as the meanings produced in the interactions between actors and objects, such as the Internet, its interfaces and texts.

In the history of this “genre”, a number of key issues of inquiry have emerged that are important for this research question: the Internet as a socially constructed artefact, theorising online identity, theorising online community, and considerations about the promises and products of Web 2.0. I will expand on each issue in turn.

3.2.1 The social construction of the Internet

If humans must attribute meaning to an external object in order to relate to it (Lynch, 2007: 138), then we can say that human communication on the Internet will involve some shared meanings about the invention itself, and the computers, software and other technologies that grant us interface with it. Social constructivism, as introduced by Pinch and Bijker (1984: 399-441), proposes that technologies are shaped by the social context in which they are used. Societies impose values on technologies that affect their potentials, and ultimately their success or failure to penetrate widespread adoption.

The story of the Internet, from its birth in secret military projects under the threat of nuclear war, through its adoption by universities for the sharing and promotion of encyclopaedic knowledge, to its release to the market for freedom of information and instant communication, is a story laden with both fear and promise. This story reflects ideological conceptions of life online, and determine how people value connection with it and through it (Campbell, 2005a: 6-12).

Castells (2001) notes that while all technologies have been shaped by the uses and values of those who adopt them, the Internet is a peculiar case as “uses of the technology, as well as the actual modifications introduced in the technology, are communicated back to the whole world, in real time”. So, in comparison with other communication devices, the time between adoption and reproduction by use of the technology is shortened to the extent that “we engage in a process of learning by producing, in a virtuous feedback between the diffusion of technology and its enhancement” (28).

In his account of the Internet’s evolution, Castells (2001: 37-61) asserts the technology has been laden with the values of four distinct cultures. The first is the techno-meritocratic culture of the academic community, which values technological discovery and peer review. Next is the hacker culture of the Internet’s “first users”, where free exchange of knowledge is upheld as a value and whose members are only respected if new discoveries are shared openly. Then there is the communitarian culture of numerous and diverse online social groups and networks, that generally promote freedom of speech and horizontal (i.e. equality in) communication, including the freedom to form bonds of association and to create own networks. Lastly there is the entrepreneurial culture of web developers and their companies, in which penetration of the technology into all aspects of social living has become a primary motivation for technological innovation.

Hine (2000: 32-34) recalls that early adoption of the Internet proclaimed an anarchic, counter-cultural attitude that still permeates hacker and cyberpunk culture. Later adoption by the relative

“masses” of the general public through commercial Internet service providers were seen as a challenge to the already established norms of life online. The ways in which the Internet is used is based as much on its metaphorical shaping as its historical and contextual construction. The technology is read by the user, not just the messages it carries, and researchers know that these readings of the Internet are products of historical and cultural factors, that are acknowledged in the study of interaction between users online.

3.2.2 Theorising online identity

Found inside the metaphorical shaping of the Internet is play. “Reduced cues” theory sees the lack of social cues expected in offline interaction available in Cyberspace, which allows for users to exercise greater freedom in self-expression, to apply greater agency in the constructions of online identity, and to use play in how they present themselves to others. Turkle’s seminal work on online identity construction, *Life on the screen*, presented findings based on interviews with MUD users/players to propose that people experience a new relationship with their own identities when online, one that reflects the postmodern quest for meaning in contemporary culture.

[Postmodernism is] difficult to define simply, but [it’s] characterized by such terms as “decentered,” “fluid,” “nonlinear,” and “opaque.” They contrast with modernism, the classical world-view that has dominated Western thinking since the Enlightenment. The modernist view of reality is characterized by such terms as “linear,” “logical,” “hierarchical,” and by having “depths” that can be plumbed and understood. MUDs offer an experience of the abstract postmodern ideas that had intrigued yet confused me during my intellectual coming of age. [...] In a surprising and counter-intuitive twist, in the past decade, the mechanical engines of computers

have been grounding the radically nonmechanical philosophy of postmodernism. (Turtle, 1996: 17)

Turtle sees in Cyberspace a “moratorium” on traditional notions of identity, which falls in line with the “many manifestations of multiplicity in our culture”. This moratorium offers a space for growth, making Cyberspace a place to practise being ourselves, returning in and out from an offline world where we must constantly negotiate different roles and their demands (260-263).

Having literally written our online personae into existence, we are in a position to be more aware of what we project into everyday life. Like the anthropologist returning home from a foreign culture, the voyager in virtuality can return to a real world better equipped to understand its artifices. (263)

Life on the screen has provided a platform for much further empirical study and accompanying theorising on the nature of online identities. While it cannot be said it was the intention of the author, many have used her emphases on “identity as play”, “Cyberspace as moratorium” and “multiplicity” as points for critique, calling her treatment of virtual life discontinuous with “real world” identity-making.

Lövheim, drawing on the work of Giddens, sees identity as a reflexive exercise, a project of exploration and construction within the context of social relationships (Lövheim, 2004: 62; 2005: 5). In her studies of online interactions between young people, Lövheim has seen that users may indeed see Cyberspace as such a “moratorium” as described by Turtle, due to the lack of “cues”, but she has noticed that when this lack brings insecurity, users bring cues, rituals and mores from offline social experience to compensate. Thus the lack of cues is not enough for online social interaction to make for a safe and useful “moratorium” of identity, a place for identity play. Social trust is a necessary element. Trust in the medium is not enough; Lövheim also suggests trust in

one's ability to express oneself in written language and in the conventions of interaction one expects online are important to generate enough trust to present oneself online (2005: 18).

Hine criticises approaches to web sites, such as home pages and blogs, as forms of self-presentation that neglect contexts in which they are produced, such as "the conception of the web audience and the technology's capabilities; the social and institutional location of the web designer; and the relationships between web pages" (2000: 26). Taking into account these attributes of web-based information, we cannot assume online identity may be intrinsically multiple and fluid. Users online that make statements about their identity and their world, (both online and offline) are "strategic performances" that may well be a search to presentation of an authentic identity, that is continuous between fields of interaction both in Cyberspace and "the real world" (2000: 144). If presentations of the online self are performances that occur through language, then a discursive analysis of identity online may show how conventions, symbols and text are drawn from both online and offline experiences to construct online identities, and establish relationships with other users for the strengthening of community (2000: 142-144).

3.2.3 Theorising online community

The blogosphere presents a need to rethink the conceptualisation of community for both religion and research purposes. It is hardly a bounded community. While those involved in conversation through posts and comments on one blog may see the limits of the communicative space in the one web page, however bloggers are connected with other bloggers who are connected again with others in a way that the limits of communication cannot be drawn. Network is a better word to describe the constellation of connections that bloggers and readers navigate through the blogosphere.

Moreover, Castells (2001) suggests that the idea of community in the offline world, as a point of comparison with online community, may be idealised beyond the reality. Modern Western life, for the author, has seen the rise of personal relationships outside families and embedded

communities (schools, churches, sporting groups, workplaces) as a dominant pattern of sociability, to the embodiment of “me-centred networks”.

It represents the privatization of sociability. This individualized relationship to society is a specific pattern of sociability, not a psychological attribute. It is rooted, first of all, in the individualization of the relationship between capital and labor, between workers and the work process, in the network enterprise. It is induced by the crisis of patriarchalism, and the subsequent disintegration of the traditional nuclear family, as constituted in the late nineteenth century. It is sustained (but not produced) by the new patterns of urbanization, as suburban and exurban sprawl, and the de-linking between function and meaning in the micro-places of megacities, individualize and fragment the spatial context of livelihood. And it is rationalized by the crisis of political legitimacy, as the growing distance between citizens and the states stressed the mechanisms of representation, and fosters individual withdrawal from the public sphere. The new pattern of sociability in our societies is characterized by networked individualism. (128-129)

Castells blames not the Internet on the rise of networked individualism, but sees that this pattern of sociability works best online, as it "provides an appropriate material support for the diffusion of networked individualism as the dominant form of sociability" (131).

Castells' idea suggests the idealisation of community in a formal religious context. Especially for post-Vatican II Catholicism and mainstream Protestantism, the congregation is highly prized as a sacrament, the face of Christ's presence on earth, the starting point and destination of the church's mission. But in a late modern society the congregation cannot singularly represent the religious identity and practice of its members, but can only be a node in the network of everyday living that informs those things.

So in these times perhaps “community” is not a description of what is, but of the ideals that either attract or repel people from engagement in religious activity. Community is a construct. The blogosphere is a place where religious people not only construct community online through their interactions, but engage in the practice of discursively reconstructing religious community as a whole.

As Turkle did with theories of online identity, Rheingold opened conversation and debate on theorising online community with *The Virtual Community*, in which he attempts to define community in Cyberspace as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships” (1995: 5). Since then, sociologists have endeavoured to define what constitutes community and by what conditions online communities evolve by studying online behaviour in relation to limitations and opportunities presented by the technologies used, the structure of interdependency (e.g. common interests and purposes of the group) and the effects of group characteristics on members’ cognitive processes (see Matzat, 2004). These research efforts have been bound, however, by the investigation of single sites of online interaction, studying a chat room or email group, say, as if the medium constituted the primary gathering point of the community’s members (Matzat, 2004: 69). Yet in the blogosphere, as in social networking sites and other platforms in Web 2.0, there is no one site of interaction that can point to a community of users.

Castells, in his appraisal of mass media in the late twentieth century, asserts that new media, rather than fulfilling his predictions, have overturned a number of McLuhan’s famous theses. For example, the diversification and decentralisation of commercial television has produced a market where the message is the medium. Audiences turn to different channels for different information, to find the channel tailored to the “rites and language of this audience, not only in the context but in the whole organization of the station and in the technology and design of

image/broadcasting” (1996: 340). Music, news and weather, sport, comedy and education programming find themselves in their own channels designed for their specific content, shaping the entire medium.

Castells maintains that audiences, too, become as specialised, segmented and diverse as the media around them, to the point that “we are not living in a global village, but in the customized cottages globally produced and locally distributed” (1996: 341). Rather than connecting people from around the planet to a common agora for the sharing of stories, symbols, language and information, as McLuhan may have imagined, media have created innumerable nodes of connection that users simply pass through, in their navigation of an information culture and economy. Theorising the structuring of social relations through media is an idea about a space of flows, “which, in contrast to the space of place, is organized around connection rather than location. Flows of people, information, money, circulate between nodes which form a network of associations” (Hine, 2000: 61).

This researcher considers the construction of individual and communal identities as a reflexive project, involving an exchange of meaning, in a media environment where community space cannot be defined by boundaries (like those made apparent in a chat room, email group, or offline location) but is described as points of interaction in a network of connections. While a network analysis may offer some shape to the network of associations in which bloggers in the study explore an emerging church identity, a discursive analysis of interactions between bloggers may give insight into how bloggers conceive an “emerging church blogosphere” and the devices with which they construct a blogging community.

Chayko identifies such devices used in social interaction online to create and strengthen “sociomental bonds” between users and their audiences, like the presentation of symbols, play with language (including emoticons) and rituals (by which she means meaningful practices, such as the adoption of a writing schedule) (2002: 83-89). Hine notes that linguistic conventions, and,

more explicitly, the presentation of rules of interaction, can create community boundaries by identifying insiders and outsiders, and contributes to the development of shared practices, knowledge and collective goods by which users can identify a membership to a community (2000: 18-19). In her study of young women's use of blogs as a social network, Bortree recognises that forms of explicit self-representation point to certain perceptions of community, including the identification of members and outsiders, and to the place of users among others (e.g. as socially competent, as leaders or followers etc), but that other devices are also employed, such as the list of links to other sites, or simple "shout-outs" to other bloggers (2005: 36-37).

3.2.4 Web 2.0 rhetoric and reality

Hypertext-based media have historically presented media theorists with challenges to conceptions of producer/owner, content/text and audience/consumer and relationships between them. Hypertext brings a sense of depth to a web page, a design structure that extends beyond the page, and offers further meaning to the text read there. Interpretation of meaning from text has always been the project of the reader, but in hypertext the reader has further control over what text is available for interpretation. While the writer has historically been the designer of the reading project, in hypertext the reader engages their own design to the reading (Burn and Parker, 2003: 31-32).

Hypertext, Enzensberger suggests, allows for the shift of power from producer to consumer in the creation and distribution of information. New media produce no object that can be contained or auctioned, and challenges notions of property and heritage. In new media, historical material is recorded in a fashion that allows it to be reproduced at the will of the reader, for the creation of social memory, a history that is manipulable by the "masses, not just the elite" (2000: 59). New media is emancipatory, the writer claims, in that it frees both text from the producer and people from the audience. Emancipatory media is decentralised, where each receiver is a potential

transmitter, where the masses are mobilised, where production is collective and control is fuelled by self-organisation (2000: 64).

The rise in popular distribution and consumption of Web 2.0 applications (blogs, podcasts, wikis, social networking sites and so forth) has brought about much utopian rhetoric about its present and future impact to communication and culture. Much of this rhetoric is centred around the key themes of *democratisation*, *the rise of the user* and *the blurring of boundaries between public and private domains of discourse*.

The rhetoric of democratisation claims networked media allow ordinary users to create media text that challenges the power of traditional organisations to produce, distribute and regulate mass media text. With the explosion of personal web sites offering a range of detailed experiences and opinions about local and global events, come an increasing number of sources of news and information to rival the stronghold of mass journalism outlets. Likewise, online journals posted by tourists create more easily accessible, and perhaps more reliable, guides to other prospective travellers than published holiday guides. Cookbooks may potentially be made obsolete by the range of home cooking blogs made by home-based cooks. Democratisation rhetoric includes the claim that Web 2.0 media technologies give voices to otherwise marginalised groups of people, including women, young people and members of minority cultural and linguistic groups (Beer and Burrows, 2007).

More than allowing conditions by which the democratisation of media and information occurs, the story of Web 2.0 platforms like blogging is one of the democratisation of software development. Holtz (2006: 25) records the development of such software as fuelled by the open-source movement, whose members contain “fed-up” consumers who desired to provide improvements to available technology more quickly than commercial companies could provide, and were willing to offer them for free, on the condition that further improvements would in turn be made freely available. In open-source, producers are also consumers. The development of the

blog, from its introduction in 1999 as an open-source platform (Jensen, 2003: 22), to the growth of features such as the permalink, commenting threads and the trackback, were first developed by users and offered to the community of developers (Blood, 2004: 55).

As bloggers, podcasters and users of other Web 2.0 formats share information among themselves, online search engines (like Google and Technorati) give rankings of authority to those users who receive links from others. These rankings capture the attention of other media, including mainstream news and editorials. The rhetoric of the rise of the user involves both the claim that user challenges the place of the author or presenter (in the worlds of print and television respectively) as a source of authority in a world where the web is a dominant medium of culture, and the claim that the user profile is a commodity of exchange among participants in that medium (Beer and Burrows, 2007; Kaye, 2005: 89-94).

These sites may be devoted to the presentation and sharing of information about public issues, from politics through religion to knitting and software development, but will also share information about the user and their private lives, joys and concerns. Sites are developed for social bonding as much as for sharing of information, and private discourse enters the public domain. Bloggers are considered narcissistic and boring by those who come across these sites presuming to find the same sets of discourse that they would in newspapers, journals and magazines (Cohen, 2006: 166). The rhetoric of the blur between public and private discourse involves the claim that private conversations occur in the public sphere, and challenge the exclusion of that sphere to certain types of discourse (Kambouri and Hatzopoulos, 2007).

Recent empirical studies have shown that these utopian expectations on the impact of Web 2.0 have not been met, and are yet to overcome certain obstacles. Firstly the presentation of the blogosphere in other media, such as print and television news, shows that it is discursively constructed as male, professional and public. Journalism tends to pay attention to those blogs that appear at or near the top of lists in search engines, and would therefore have high

Technorati or Google “authority rankings”. These rankings are based on the number of instances a blog is referenced (by hyperlink) by another blog. Though blogs by women are not outnumbered by those authored by men, men adopted blogging as a practice earlier than most women, and are therefore favoured by these references (Harp and Tremayne, 2006: 258). Men are also more likely to write in a style more akin to the discourse of public journalism, creating filter blogs (where posts are links to other information found on the Internet, and reviews on these pages’ recordings of world events) or knowledge blogs (blogs focussed around a particular public issue, such as technology or politics). Women are less likely to create these types of blogs, but are more likely to write personal journals (Herring, Kouper et al., 2004).

While women do blog about public issues, such as politics, economics and technology, research shows they tend to do so from a private perspective, such as the politics of child care or the economics of daily commuting. Though private discourse enters the public blogosphere in these online journals, it is viewed as being of “less quality” than the public discourse of filter and knowledge blogs, precisely by the fact they do not attract hyperlinked references, authority rankings, and the attention of journalists. Their private discourses fall outside preconceived definitions of politics, economics, etc., and are deprivileged, or ignored, in the discursive construction of the blogosphere (Harp and Tremayne, 2006: 258-259).

As a second point, van Dijck notes in his investigation of user-generated content in platforms like YouTube, that Web 2.0 applications, rather than blurring the divide between professional and amateur content creation, “actually boosts the power of media moguls, enhancing their system of star ratings and upward mobility” (2009: 53). The role of users in current Web 2.0 applications is not just to offer content to other users, but to offer information about themselves (sometimes unwittingly) to the producers of the platform (in YouTube’s case, Google) for sale to advertisers. User-generated sites have strengthened the bonds between producers, advertisers and consumers in the media economy, offering a privileged place for professional content providers

who can buy it. Where user-generated sites like YouTube are seen in context of a wider media industry, including television, film and journalism, “it is unlikely that professional markets will give way to a powerful base structure consisting of volunteers with enhanced claims to creative autonomy and financial independence. On the contrary, user agency is defined more than ever by the capital-intensive and technology-driven economies of global, vertically integrated markets” (2009: 49, 53).

3.3 Research into religion, media and culture

The small but growing tradition of research into religion, media and culture is emerging in many academic disciplines, including communications, journalism, cultural studies, politics and theology. Morgan (2008: 4-7) recalls that the discipline of cultural studies, with its British Marxist bent, by-and-large ignored religion as a dimension of culture deserving academic attention, right up until the late 1980s. The respective works of Turner (1969) and Geertz (1973) argued the importance of the examination of ritual for understanding cultural mechanisms for making meaning. Together, these works promoted the humanistic study of communication as a matter of culture, rather than the quantitative study of communication as process. In this new discipline religion could have a place as a system of communicative practices, that construct and exchange symbols and narratives that have world-making power, rather than be seen as a system of outdated or reactionary ideologies. So the study of religion, media and culture sprung from an understanding of media as “the generation of experiences, forms of shared consciousness, communion, or community that allow people to assemble meanings that articulate and extend their relations to one another” (Morgan, 2008: 7).

Early work employed this theoretical framework in the study of religion in contemporary electronic media culture. Stewart Hoover’s (1988) study of televangelism provided unique insight into the individual viewer’s involvement in the placement and shaping of symbolic elements that

make televised religion. It led the way for other authors (for example, Alexander, 1994) to consider the consumption of television both as ritual and as participation in religious community. Martín-Barbero (1993) theorised mass media's role in shaping perceptions of community and identity by their ritual process of "resacralisation", identifying mass media as meaning-making institutions that compete with or complement religious institutions in a secularised culture. Pierre Babin (1991) takes on McLuhan's wordplay "the medium is the message" to consider how contemporary media shape rhythms of daily life, promote certain ways of thinking and communicating, and therefore impact on how people participate in religious education and community. Babin offers a historical perspective, comparing the rise of electronic media in contemporary society to the adoption of the printing press at the time of Council Trent and the Counter-Reformation's repackaging of the catechumenate.

In the development of studies into religion, media and culture as an emergent discipline, works have tended to treat religion contextually, i.e. as it exists, and is mediated, in identity formation, cultural change, political organisation and reforms, etc. Recent studies have preferred to explore "ways in which the self dissolves in and emerges from mediated practice as unstable, discontinuous, and processual, flowing globally into extended communities and articulated in a great variety of practices" (Morgan, 2008: 8). Four themes are noted here.

One theme is the investigation of media use by religious institutions and organisations, from Catholic newspapers through religious programming in radio and television to virtual churches in Second Life (see Alexander, 1994; Bazin and Cottin, 2004; Budde, 1997; Cardwell and Thorpe, 1984; Mitchell, 2000). Another is the study of presentations of religion in journalism and mass media (see Inbody, 1990; Meyer and Moors, 2006; Sharlet and Manseau, 2004), and in particular, how mass media, as the guarantors of the public sphere, impose constraints on the voice of organised religion in public discourses on political, economic and moral issues (see Hoover, 1998; Hoover and Venturelli, 1996).

The presentation of religion in mass media involves not just an investigation into the ideologies of journalism, but also an exploration of the religious narratives, symbols and language present found in mass-mediated popular culture. Examples include the use of ritual in television programming and televised events (see Goethals, 1997; 1990; Martín-Barbero, 1997), and religious narratives in popular fiction (see Horsfield, 2005; Irwin, 1996; Martin, 1994; Pinsky, 2001; Teusner, 2005b). Not unrelated is the study of the use of these narratives and symbols in popular culture by audiences to construct and present religious identities, including theorising the religious practice of media consumption (see Beaudoin, 1998; Clark, 2003; 2005; Teusner, 2005a).

From a reading of this tradition of research into religion, media and culture, some common theses may be drawn. To start, the term “religion” in the study of religion, media and culture, is difficult to define and cannot be taken for granted. Lynch (2007) asserts that substantive, phenomenological and functional definitions either neglect many practices that are considered religious in contemporary society (especially Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Confucianism) or, from a post-structuralist perspective, expose a modern European (Christian or post-Christian) ideology. In response, the writer suggests turning attention to conception of “the sacred”, and defines the sacred as “an object defined by a particular quality of human thought, feeling and behaviour in which it is regarded as a grounding or ultimate source of power, identity, meaning and truth. This quality of human attention to the sacred object is constructed and mediated through particular social relations, and cultural practices and resources”. Taking on this definition, religion can be defined as social and cultural systems “which are oriented towards sacred objects” (2007: 138). Lynch suggests that the field of religion, media and culture, in considering this definition, would approach the following questions:

What role do different media production and consumption play in nurturing
(or indeed undermining) the human experience of being bound to sacred
objects? How are different human senses engaged through media and

popular culture to serve as means of contact with sacred objects? And what role does aesthetics or emotion play in reproducing a sense of relation to the sacred through media and popular culture? (2007: 140)

Another thesis is that there is a religious dimension in the social construction of media technologies. An example of the religious construction of technology is the placement of the television in the homes of audiences of televangelism programming, as a tool for the practice of ritual (Alexander, 1997: 198). Another is the set of practices of Amish communities around the use of the telephone, to promote community cohesion and prevent actions considered individualistic (Campbell, 2005b). These instances of investigation shows that individuals and groups receive new technologies as laden with values, and religious experience and membership informs such people about how technologies can or should be adopted or rejected.

A third thesis that has been the foundation of much important work in the field is the notion that the relation of social media and religious communication, ideas, practice and organisation is interdependent, to the extent that periods of media convergence in human history have led to significant changes in religious history. Horsfield (2002), drawing on the work of Ong and Eisenstein, records how shifts in dominant social media throughout European history, from speech to writing, and then to printing, have impacted on how religious organisations store and transport information, privilege certain types of religious discourse over others in preaching, organise work and patterns of authority. Babin (1991) explores how the introduction of electronic media has shifted daily religious practice and the impacts on religious education in Christian denominations. In these works as in others, the adoption of media technologies impacts on religious discourse, the distribution of religious information and the places and times the information is produced and shared among people, and therefore patterns of authority and the power of different people and groups in having a voice in the organisation of religion (see also Goethals, 1989; Griffiths and Hardy, 2005; Griffiths, 1999; Hardy, 2005).

3.4 Key emphases in the research of religion online

Overlapping the fields of sociology of the Internet and research into religion, media and culture, key themes in the study of religion online may be identified. I will explore three here, the religious construction of the Internet, being religious online, and religious authority in the age of the Internet.

3.4.1 Religious construction of the Internet and the Cyborg

Lynch's call to consider religion as a cultural organisation around a sacred object leads to theorising about the role of the Internet in mediating the sacred. How does the Internet facilitate communication of the sacred and the human experience thereof? How does use of the Internet nurture or undermine that experience? What is sacred about the Internet? Wertheim's book, *The pearly gates of Cyberspace*, has opened debate about the religious construction of the Internet in its consideration of the Internet as an expression of religious dreams, desires and fears. When modern secular thought devalued ideas of a "heavenly realm" that intersects and inspires life in the material, physical reality, the construction of the Internet as a "cyber-space" has offered an alternative.

With this new digital space we have located an unexpected escape hatch from the physicalist dogma – for cyberspace too exists beyond physical space. Although it is true that cyberspace is realized through the by-products of physical science [...] nonetheless, cyberspace itself is not located within the physicalist worldpicture. It is a fundamentally new kind of space that is not encompassed by any physics equations. As the complexity theorists would say, cyberspace is an emergent phenomena whose properties transcend the sum of its component parts. Like the medieval Empyrean, cyberspace is a "place" outside the physical space. (1999: 41)

Brasher continues the discussion in *Give me that online religion*. For Brasher, Cyberspace has been received in our culture as the culmination of widely held values and beliefs, and therefore resembles many of the myths that permeate the stories and rituals practised in society. If we consider the Internet as a space, then, unlike physical space, it lacks consistent cultural borders and markers. Therefore the terrain of Cyberspace is contoured by the creativity and imagination of those who reside in it (2001: 8-9). The role of religion online is then to offer such markers that point to the spiritual nature and potential of life in this new realm. "Like mounting a mezuzah on the doorpost or a crucifix in the living room of a new abode, online religion classifies Cyberspace as a valued and value-producing home" (2001: 142).

The research of religion online may therefore be conceived as researching the religion of the Cyborg, as one who resides in Cyberspace. The term Cyborg has offered us a metaphor for considering both how technology shapes our humanness and how we add humanity to the machinery around us. And, in particular to this research, it can be a metaphor for how we are religious with, in and on the Internet, and how we wrap religious ideas and ideals around the technology. For while some may think of a Cyborg as one whose limbs or insides are part machine, others ask "Are you not a Cyborg the moment your hand is on your mouse?"

Long before the World Wide Web, the Cyborg had already entered academic discourse. The most notable introduction was *A Manifesto for Cyborgs* (1985), written during Reagan's presidency in the USA, and the height of a military project colloquially known as the Star Wars Project (which funded research into designing a system that would protect the country from nuclear attack through the use of lasers and satellites). A socialist feminist, Haraway saw both technology and humans in terms of Marxian economic and cultural exploitation, and recognised that the institutions that define identities and social relations are both products of ideological struggle and conspirators in ideological domination.

Haraway sees the Cyborg as both born of the era of technological and political domination, and that which will survive and overcome it. For Haraway, the Cyborg is a vehicle by which we may rise above old identities, including “woman” and “worker”, and seek new relations through our physical and cultural ties to science and technology. The Cyborg has the power to challenge boundaries that have been fundamental to society, such as those between human and animal, and organism and machine, physiological and technological. Haraway’s work contributed to a fledgling but increasingly body of thought that would become known as posthumanism. Loosely defined, posthumanism is a challenge to the assumptions of modernity that (1) what it means to be human can only be found in human organisms/*homo sapiens* and (2) that what it means to be human is constant and unchanging. Posthuman ideals point to the end of human evolution without the incorporation of technology, or the notion that our connection with technological devices mean we will cease to be human altogether. (see also Bell, 2007; Hayles, 1999; Sandoval, 1995)

Movies such as *AI*, *Johnny Mnemonic*, *The Bionic Woman*, *Metropolis*, *The Animatrix*, *Terminator*, and even *Inspector Gadget* offer us glimpses of the possible futures either where machines become human or parts of our original humanity is replaced or enhanced by machines. Even the *Alien* series of films, which is primarily about biological monsters, has running throughout a subplot beginning with an android whose amoral loyalty to government leads him to betray the protagonist and ends with an android whose “programming” leads her to betray her creators in order to save the protagonist. Our journalists promote the notion that life imitates art in their retelling of stories of people who replace artificial eyes with video cameras, prosthetic fingers with USB flash drives, and the instalment of bionic devices to not just overcome disability, but enhance performance. We have painted our popular culture with images of victorious humans who have used technology to conquer the human condition and of a further fallen humanity at the mercy of machines around and inside them.

For Erik Davis, author of *TechGnosis* (1998), the Cyborgs created in these stories are not just science fiction versions of gods and monsters, for they are also heroes and villains. They are “narrative figures who are helping us to thicken the plots we are weaving with very real, and very spunky, technologies” (189). We add story, values, and beliefs around technology because that is what humans do to all things: we add meaning to things in order to know what to do with and around them. Our stories around machines are rich because we are aware of how much we have achieved alongside them, and how much we don’t yet know we can do with them. Indeed, the popularity of Tamagotchis in the previous decade was not just because children wanted to play pet-owner with a primitive picture of an AI animal (prompting so much moral panic about the future of owning and loving a flesh-and-bone pet), but because children know their future will be surrounded by machines with whom they will relate on not just practical levels, but emotional ones too, seeing how their parents “love and hate” their computers, televisions and mobile phones.

This chapter has already shown the history of Internet technology is laden with values, to the extent we may say that the Internet is socially constructed, and there is a religious element to this too. From its birth in military laboratories, through its release to academic institutions and hacker students, to its introduction to the general market, the Internet carries tags of freedom, intimacy, democracy, secrecy, isolation and domination. These values guide our approach to the technology and our relationships to others through it. Religious constructions include the notion that Cyberspace is a realm outside the material world, free from material constraints of time, space and power, and the potential for a more just society and fuller existence. Religion can also label the Internet as a demonising and diabolical force, tempting people away from real relationships and stable communities.

These values are also formed in the context of production and consumption of all technologies, in a period where the more advanced the device, the more “like us” it is made and sold. Computers

become personal computers become desktops, which we use by opening windows and clicking images, navigating it in the way we would a house, getting to know it as if it were another person. The mobile phone becomes the personal digital assistant that we carry around not just in case somebody wants to talk with us, but because at times we may need to talk with it. Moreover, talking semiotically, we “write” on these devices, by customising desktop interfaces, adding pictures and wallpapers, making ringtones out of our favourite pop tracks, in order to make them ours. Machines are not just tools at our disposal but are culturally produced markers by which we construct our patterns of daily living, our relationships and our identities. We are Cyborg because we make machines like us in order to use them in the making of ourselves.

Yet while the “humanising” of technology is evident in the development of the Cyborg story, there is another side to it: the “machination” of the human person in modern biology, epistemology and sociology. The discovery of the chromosome prompted us to wonder how much of our impulses are guided by chemical software, and that the ultimate purpose of our existence is to maintain and recreate storage units for the information. Theorising the mind has also evolved into computing language, where memory is a network of neural pathways, and knowledge is a pattern of connecting between the outside world, our senses and the network. The poststructuralist sees human society as built by networks of power that entrance and control the individual into viewing the world, and his or her place in it, in a certain myopic way that is so overwhelming that should the network be taken away, the individual would not know why to get out of bed in the morning. Knowledge is intertwined with ideology, designed and communicated not just to enable a person’s comprehension of the outside world, but to confine to a particular role in that world. Atheism, while seen by the religious as an attack on the truth of revelation, is more an attack on the religious institutions which have become part of the great oppressive ideological machine by which we have been “programmed”.

In the apparent loss of the human soul in late modernity, past the point of no return to a time of magic and mysticism, the Cyborg has looked to technology to rediscover its humanity. Erik Davis (in the same book) tells us that technology has helped the Cyborg rise to a sense of meaning and renewal in recent history, by explaining the philosophies and stories of Gurdjieff's "machine-man" and L Ron Hubbard's "computer-mind", and mentioning that while members of the counterculture revolution of the 1960s rejected new technologies as a form of abuse and imprisonment, lauded the invention of synthetic drugs like LSD to bring them to new states of awareness. (Davis, 1998: 143-146; see also Gunkel, 2007)

And to the Internet, a machine, but laden with possibilities and magic and mysticism, the new Cyborg sees an opportunity to find a new heaven and a new earth, free from the machinations of the body and material society. For the purposes of this study, this researcher considers the religious Cyborg as one who resides on the margins of two types of space – one "virtual" and the other "actual" – in their construction of religious identity, involving negotiation of religious text, authority and experience with others in both types of space. The project of such construction also involves the discursive negotiation of "virtual" and "actual" through the use of technology, the imposition of values on the technology and the beliefs and behaviours considered in interaction with other users.

3.4.2 Being religious online

Cyborg as extension of self

This first impression of the Cyborg sees the computer, like other electronic media, as extensions of the senses. Web sites become destinations that we "arrive at" when we type in URLs or click hyperlinks. First projects of research into religion online, what Højsgaard and Warburg considered "the first wave" of research in the field, seemed primarily concerned with questions of such journeys and destinations. These pieces of fact-finding endeavoured to answer:

- What does online religion look like?
- What can people do online and why would they do it?
- What kind of people go online for religion and why? (2005: 1-11)

In 2004, Hoover, Clark and Rainie published a report for the Pew Internet and American Life series based on a widespread and in depth study of American Internet users. They asked simple questions of their sample, including “Do you go to the Internet for religious purposes?”. They found that most users of religious Internet sites were active participants in religious activities offline, and that Internet use was to enhance religious activity in other parts of their lives.

Two years earlier, Helland’s article in the journal *Religion* suggested that “religion online” and “online religion” are two distinct phenomena - one being the online impression of an online community, structure or practice, and the other a religion whose source, and perhaps entire being, is on the Internet. So while many use the Internet solely as a source of information to affect offline religious life, there are some of us for whom the Internet is an exhaustively valid place to ask spiritual questions, seek moral guidance.

In the same journal edition, Karaflogka presented her study on how religious language is translated on web sites, using the home pages of various Muslim groups on the Internet. Here she showed how organisations present themselves to an online world. Arthur gave us a look into how nature religion can manifest online, and MacWilliams considered how certain religious practices, such as pilgrimages, can be taken from topography to technology.

This “first wave” of research into online religion sought to uncover the phenomenon of religious practice on the Internet, as an evolutionary step of a differently technologised society. It did focus on how religious life online compares to offline religion, and even evaluated its merits and pitfalls against what we knew about religious life in the “real world”. In doing so, however, it tended, mostly, to start with preconceived understandings of “what religious practice” was, evident in its methodologies. What was considered a religious web site, or what could be seen as a purely

religious practice, was based on their similarities with what we saw in mosques and coven gatherings and dangling from car rear-view mirrors.

Højsgaard and Warburg believe, as do I, that while talk of “waves” of research into online religion implies some chronological development, it is perhaps better to see them as shifts in focus which have generally occurred over time, but not universally. Some research products fit into different “waves” at different times, based on different circumstances, and different universities, research traditions and countries.

Indeed, a few years would pass since the aforementioned works before the first extensive study of religion in the blogosphere was published. From a sample of two hundred Christian blogs and interviews with 49 authors, Cheong, Halavais and Kwon (2008) used both quantitative and qualitative measures to analyse religious content online, motivations for blogging, and links between religious blogs and other online information. The following claims were made:

1. That some users find the act of blogging a part of their regular religious practice, as a response to religious experiences recognised in daily living.
2. That bloggers linked to such a number of external sites that have little or no religious content, that the researchers could say bloggers did not limit their exposure to only religious content.
3. That blogs are a vehicle for mission to readers, through the promotion of Christian responses to world events and issues, and the engagement of readers in conversation about participation in society as religious people.
4. That blogging has a function for entertainment and escapism.

The authors conclude that the blogosphere provides for the faithful an environment where the religious and the secular are explored, expressed and debated equally and freely, where other

social environments may be perceived to favour one over the other. In the blogosphere, claim the authors, the profane and sacred spheres merge.

Adopting a uses and gratifications approach to the sample, the research did not extend beyond an analysis of the relationship between the technology and the primary user, appearing to take an atomistic approach to analysis of blog content and bloggers' interaction with the technology. Indeed it lacks study of interaction between bloggers and their readership. The authors make note of this exclusion, prompting future research to "expand the investigation by delving into more posts that constitute blog texts within a religious tradition and investigate the links of individual blog posts. As blogs offer an alternative in religious self-expression, future research could investigate the implications of critical communicative shifts on traditional religious norms, including governing sanctions and concepts of religious authority and leadership" (127).

Like Cheong, Halavais and Kwon's work, studies of religion online in the first "wave" tended to approach their data as content to be considered as composed and consumed by individual users. The next "wave" would approach the Internet as sites for, through interaction between users, the creation, modification and reinforcement of religious norms, practices and structures.

Cyborg as status

Rather than considering the Cyborg as one who extends oneself online, Brasher calls her readers to think of Cyborgs differently:

Like vassal lord, citizen, and proletariat before it, the cyborg paints humanness in a historical context. It discloses how the organization of contemporary social and political life is working in consort with the reigning means of production to influence the range of humanness possible in our era. (1996: 814)

If the introduction of a new technology has the power to change the social order, then those for whom ICT is an accessible mode of communication may be a particular class of people, whose language, values and access to resources and even worldviews may differ from those to whom ICT is alien. For Brasher, the Cyborg is a metaphor not for how humans reach information online, but for how they interact, both online with each other and offline with Cyborgs and non-Cyborgs alike.

This new metaphor sits as a useful label for describing what Højsgaard and Warburg identified as the “second wave” of research into religion online. In this wave researchers interested themselves more in the nature of religious practice online. It included rites of passage, ritual and the placement of authority in online Wiccan groups (see Helland, 2005), identity formation among adolescents (see Lövheim, 2005; Lövheim and Linderman, 2005), the establishment of trust in email groups (see Campbell, 2005a). It also included discursive constructions of the technology itself, within religious communities and structures of power (see Campbell, 2005b; Dawson, 2005; O'Leary, 2005).

The “third wave”, whose advent was heralded by Højsgaard and Warburg but not yet complete, was to be what can be researched about the impact of Cyborg religion on religion in the offline world. It would include comparisons of structures of authority and knowledge between online and offline groups, such as the study of Barker (2005) on cult groupings, and of Campbell (2007) on how religious authority is asserted in online conversations about religion. Cross-cultural perspectives are also noted here, highlighted with emphasis by the *Journal of CMC* (12:3), and in Lily Kong's (2001) deliberations on a geography of virtual sacred space.

These new “waves” took a detour from quantitative approaches to online religion - counting sites, users, demographics, to consider ethnographic pursuits and sociological ponderings about the humans who were doing the religion in this world. Yet as the first wave showed a presumption

about what is religious, these sets of work tend to make presumptions about the Internet, specifically, as a realm of being religious that is discrete and separate from the world outside.

Cyborg as Internet impression

Increasing access to high-speed Internet connections in the developed world, prolific use of mobile media devices, and the popularity of Web 2.0 applications have changed the nature of being online. Firstly, we are aware that being online is no longer a discrete step. For many who have enjoyed Internet access for years, and for those who have made it to adulthood without knowing life before the Web, Cyberspace need not be a place we need to make time or room for, but is something constantly within reach. As Pang suggests (quoted in Thomas, 2006):

Why is cyberspace coming to an end? Our experience of interacting with digital information is changing. We're moving to a world in which we (or objects acting on our behalf) are online all the time, everywhere. Designers and computer scientists are also trying hard to create a new generation of devices and interfaces that don't monopolize our attention, but ride on the edges of our awareness. We'll no longer have to choose between cyberspace and the world; we'll constantly access the first while being fully part of the second. Because of this, the idea of cyberspace as separate from the real world will collapse.

Secondly, as blogs and social networking sites present our daily lives to friends, file sharing networks allow us to add our impressions to already published media, and aggregator programs both bring the Web to us, and share our favourite bits of the Web for others to see, the Internet is collecting and shaping an impression of ourselves, and presenting a façade of its users to the world. Thomas (2006) says it plainly:

[...] every time we use eBay or write a Gmail, we make a trade-off between body, technology and nature by allowing our data to become part of that organization's knowledge base.

In Web 2.0, producer and audience are blurred with the text and the medium. I am Cyborg, not just because I look at the Internet and see the world, but because *the world looks at the Internet, and sees me*. These two phenomena present a challenge to reform our concept of Cyborg and present new questions for researching being religious online, perhaps calling for a “fourth wave” of research into religion on the Internet.

3.4.3 Religious authority in the age of the Internet

Filoramo sees Cyberspace as “being at the opposite pole to the traditional sociological scenario of the great religions, composed of institutions, bureaucracy and tradition; it is non-stop chaos: anarchy, immediacy, fragmentation” (2003: 39). Dawson complements the assertion in his theorising of the “disembodiment” of religious organisation in online settings, resulting in the removal of material sacred objects and a greater dependence on the reflexivity of identity, community and authority (2005: 33). In these assertions the writers imagine the expression of religious ideas in words and practice completely free from the rule of the Church. This researcher suspects that they may be too extreme in their conceptions of religious organisation both online and in the real world. Indeed, while religious institutions may be bound by bureaucratic systems, local, grounded communities are known to frequently negotiate official dogma, teachings and practices with personal and communal experience. The reverse may be true for religion online, where users negotiate new social conventions, language, identities, and the freedom thereof, with the knowledge, values and conventions of their offline religious experience.

This chapter has already noted that patterns of authority are being identified by users. Hyperlinks form the currency for various search engines that allocated authority to Internet places and voices. Research has noted that certain discourses attract this currency, and therefore specific

groups of users are awarded greater authority than others. Religious authority may be more or less “disembodied” from the offices of religious institutions in an online space. However, if we, like Hine and Castells, understand Cyberspace as a “space of flows”, then we must take into account the discursive and symbolic patterns of this space that place constraints on interaction and expression. As Turner puts it, power “is not necessarily embodied; it is a switchpoint in the information flow” (2007: 123). If users of new online media engage in building of religious identity and community by navigating the information flows, they will recognise, accept, adopt, claim, reject, nurture and/or subvert voices appealing to authority, voices claiming authority and the systems by which that authority is legitimated. These systems may be imported from offline religious experience and knowledge, or may be found in Cyberspace.

3.5 Conceptions and contributions

This researcher locates the study of Australian emerging church bloggers at the intersection of a number of research issues:

1. The historically uneasy place of Christianity in the Australian public sphere, and the regulation of its more recent “deprivatisation” into “left and “right” political and moral camps.
2. A poststructuralist understanding that religious symbols and practices serve to alienate some while giving and maintaining power to others, as a reason for the dissatisfaction of many with contemporary churches and a search for new modes of expression that are “authentic” to postmodern culture.
3. The rise in dominance of the so-called “me-centred network”, that transcends local groupings and institutions such as family, work and religion, as a pattern of sociability, and its challenge to the notion that identity is connected to participation in these latter groupings and institutions.

4. The presentation of Web 2.0 as an environment for the open parliament on symbols and practices that attract or disengage people from participation in contemporary religious environments. Web 2.0 promises democratisation and equality of voices, the blurring of public and private discourses, and the dissolving of divisions between producers and consumers of media text.
5. That despite these promises, the blogosphere is a space of flows contoured by systems of authority and the discursive practices that shape them. Participation in the blogosphere involves identifying these discursive practices, and points of authority, whether in an endeavour to support, oppose or subvert them.

At the nexus of these issues is the theoretical construction of the spiritual Cyborg, whose identity sits at the margins of both Cyberspace and offline religious communities, who resides wholly in neither space, yet travels from one realm to the other in everyday interactions, shaping their identity on the Internet and at the same time shaping the Internet by their participation in it.

To summarise this review, the following statements comprise a conceptual framework that guide the implementation of the following research project:

1. The construction of religious identity is a process of reflexivity within social interactions maintained through the exchange of meaning communicated in language.
2. Community in cyberspace is better described as a network of connections than as a bounded space. Online identity is constructed in the navigation of these connections.
3. A discursive analysis is equipped to investigate the project of individual and communal identities, in the identification of conventions, symbols, language and rituals, to determine how members are differentiated from outsiders, and how shared practices, knowledge and collective goods are developed. Some of these practices are conventions and practices are learned online, while others are imported from offline experiences of social interaction.

4. Negotiating perceived authority is part of the process of identity construction. Some authority is asserted in social interaction, while authority is also found in the systems by which online interaction is framed.
5. In the investigation of identity construction among bloggers, it is then necessary to consider the interactions between the blogger and their audience, the wider blogosphere, presentations of offline religious experience, and discursive constructions of the Internet and the devices by which the Internet is accessed.

This researcher intends to contribute to the next step in the progression of research into online religion. This “fourth wave” will keep quieter on questions like “Where is the religious Internet and what will it do for me?” and “What can we do online that we can’t do offline and vice versa?” and “What will happen to me when I go online, who will I meet and what will I become?”. Rather, questions will be more like “What is religious about the Internet that I create, gather, rear, mould and cultivate?” Presumptions existent in previous waves of research may be overcome.

For example, Johns’ (2008) study of religious affiliation and identity among Facebook users showed that Facebook groups with overt religious titles had generally minimal activity. Users who would join these groups would offer little to the group beyond their membership. Johns suggests that in Facebook, users “wave a hello” to religion. What Johns could not study, because he was not “friends with” every Facebook user in the groups he studied, was that it’s likely that any of the groups’ users would have the group advertised (sometimes prominently) on the users profile page. So while the user would not be active within the group, the group’s existence sends a message to all who seek the user in the networking site. The user has used the group (well, the link to the group) to speak for him/her. The link speaks of the user’s religious identity. We see him/her through that group’s page. Yet if the question were posed to these users, “How do you do religion online?”, it is doubtful if they would say they do religion online at all, even though they may claim to be religious in everyday life.

Another example can be found again in Facebook, and in particular to Facebook user profiles being created posthumously (Kavulla, 2007). Also known as tomb pages, these profile pages offer a space to remember lost friends. Religious activity may be evident in these sites, in the posts and conversations of visitors, in the publications of prayers and blessings, or tagging images of candles and beads. However if Hoover, Clark and Rainie's question "Do you go to the Internet for religious purposes?" was asked to these users, the answer may be a resounding negative.

Presumptions about what makes an online practice a religious one, and what makes a religious practice an online one, may be overcome in this fourth wave, as the research tradition experiences a new shift of focus. Lövheim (2008) recognises it well, calling researchers like this one to reconsider the "purpose and the social contexts of interaction with religion online". Firstly, we must ask less about users' "relation to religious communities on the Internet", as if online religious communities can tell us all we need to know about online religion. Instead we must consider how religion is a component of the wider "social contexts organized through and in connection to new media". Secondly, we must ask less about Internet as a place where religion is done in peculiar, unique or traditional ways, and more about how the Internet is one "context for negotiations of the place and value of religion in the wider society and culture".

In keeping with these new objectives, this research will seek to address the following questions:

1. What does this research have to say about the continuity or fragmentation between online and offline identities, and identities in different online settings? For what ends do emerging church bloggers seek a fragmented or continuous online identity?
2. What do the values of "real" and "virtual" mean to participants in online religious networks such as the emerging church blogosphere? Do online settings comprise all that bloggers see as a community, or are they merely a context for considering religious community according to a wider definition? What do emerging church bloggers do to enhance or maintain sociomental bonds in their network of associations?

3. Does the experience of emerging church bloggers reflect the rhetoric of Web 2.0 or the reality?
4. In what ways are emerging church bloggers free from the constraints of systems of offline religious authority? What constraints do they identify in the blogging environment and how do they respond to it?

4.0 Methodology

This chapter offers a framework for researching the activity of bloggers in constructing their own religious identities, as well as their negotiations around the identity of the emerging church movement. It also outlines the methods by which the sample of investigation has been identified, and the structure by which Internet sites in the sample are analysed.

4.1 Conceiving identity construction in the blogosphere

The works of Lövheim and Linderman (2005) and of Marshall (2007) have been helpful starting points in providing this researcher with an understanding for how identity is constructed on the Internet, and they have offered a strong basis for further theorising religious identity construction in the particular field of blogging. The authors draw on the works of sociologists such as Goffman, Giddens, Putnam and Slevin, giving new insights into how identity is developed and maintained in society, and what both modernity and CMC bring into play in identity construction.

The construction of personal identity, according to Lövheim and Linderman, is a social project, in that it is borne on a reflexive process between the individual and the social context in which the individual interacts. When talking about religious identity, this may involve socialisation into a community whose collective identity is adopted by an individual, or at least some of its values and beliefs are assumed into the individual's belief system and values (2005: 121-123). Dependent on their place within the authority structure, individuals also contribute to the collective identity of the community, which may also be the result of a process between itself and the wider society.

The writers note Giddens' critique of modern society, where there is a "disembedding" of social interaction out of the local context. Technological advancement has facilitated mobility and telecommunication, resulting in the development of non-localised social activities and the loss of power of face-to-face interaction in the construction of identity. As local institutions become less

authoritative, knowledge becomes more relative, and identity construction becomes a project of increasing uncertainty (Lövheim and Linderman, 2005: 123).

Roger Silverstone (cited in Orgad, 2007: 36) considers this “disembedding” in terms of the “proper distance” between participation in a social setting.

Proper distance refers to the importance of understanding the more or less precise degree of proximity required in our mediated interrelationships if we are to create and sustain a sense of the other sufficient not just for reciprocity but for a duty of care, obligation and responsibility, as well as understanding.

For Silverstone, the disembedding of interaction from local contexts means an expansion of the proper distance between participants. So while the Internet may appear to bring people together, the proper distance between them is maintained, making it difficult to engender social trust.

In contexts where interaction leads to identity formation, two ingredients are required. The first is a system of etiquette. For Marshall, trust is achieved when one “is convinced that another’s ‘inner’ is on display, and that this inner is acceptable” (2007: 106). Etiquette helps to create this trust, as it serves those involved in the interaction to determine the “nature of a situation [and] its predictability” (2007: 106). Lövheim and Linderman assert that a context requires a shared understanding of the rules of interaction. Community members must know what the purposes of the community are, and what are right and wrong ways of relating to each other (2005: 125-126).

The second ingredient is social trust, which is exchanged between members of the context of interaction. Individuals are attracted to interact with others in a social grouping if they perceive it as a trusting environment (Lövheim and Linderman, 2005: 123).

In modern contexts like Christian congregations, both etiquette and trust may be institutionalised. The presence of an ordained person may be trusted by those who have placed

their trust in the authority structures of the denomination, and formalised actions like rites and rituals provide markers for members' association and roles in the community. Marshall suggests that in late modernity these formalised roles and symbolic practices are less "authentic", that is, they are no longer able to entreat trust by some that they reflect the 'inner' nature of community: "the tendency of the [Western] world has been towards the removal of *formal* ritual and etiquette from social life and their replacement by demands for transparency and 'authenticity'" (2007: 107).

Those involved in the emerging church conversation would be an example of those in late modernity of whom Marshall speaks. The emerging church movement holds authenticity as a prime value. The whole notion of being "missional" is wrapped in ideals of "being true" to both faith foundations, and to the cultural environment. Emerging churches strip away symbolic practices that are seen to have lost their authenticity - robes, processions, lengthy prayers and litanies – and experiment with new practices that are more true to everyday living and thinking.

Symbolic practices are often the focus of discussion in the emerging church blogosphere: what stays in, what is taken out, by what they are replaced. Bloggers find online a forum to express their concern that modern religious life does not reflect what is "inside them" and a place to explore and evaluate what authentic religious life looks like. For them, the blogosphere is a parliament on the etiquette and social trust within Christian churches. This parliament is founded on the values associated with the Internet: a place where the etiquettes and rules of proper religious communication are lifted in favour of the search for authenticity. In contrast to Giddens' lament over the disembedding of social interaction from the local context, the blogosphere offers a space to recreate the conditions for trust to cultivate authentic religious identity, and consider new methods to reduce the "proper distance" between bloggers and readers in the construction of online community.

Yet communicative practices and symbols borne online mean that the blogosphere is not completely devoid of etiquette rules. Furthermore, in seeking connections for religious purposes, users may bring to their blogging experience expectations and values inherited from offline religious participation. The Pew Internet & American Life Project's *Faith Online* (Hoover, Clark et al., 2004) reports that those who use the Internet for spiritual or religious purposes do so as "a *supplement* to, rather than a *substitute* for offline religious life" (p. ii, emphasis in original publication). Here, project researchers asked their sample of participants about their use of the Internet for religious purposes. They found that those who use the Internet for religious pursuits are more likely to be involved in offline religious practices and communities. The project's scope was limited by the definition of the word "religious", as confined to traditional connotations, such as gathering information about known religious groups, seeking prayer support or information about spirituality and liturgy. Thus it may exclude uses of Internet resources that may be not so obviously religious in nature.

Campbell's presentation of a study on membership in three online Christian communities, however, confirms and builds on Pew's above assertion. Her key findings were that:

- involvement in online Christian communities does not cause people to leave or shy away from real world participation,
- people join these communities for relationships with others, rather than information, and
- descriptions made of online community provide critiques of real world situations, to the extent that online community presents a vision for how the offline world should be more like. (Campbell, 2003: 233)

These findings would support the claim mentioned above, that the Internet provides an alternative social setting for people to seek or practice a variety of religious functions and activities, from the gathering of religious information to pastoral support and counselling. Importantly, online religious sites may comprise a particularly useful resource for those who

experience marginalisation, of some form or another, in offline religious communities. They may also support the claim that the Internet supports freedom of interaction, as building relationships is the attraction of the Internet to many users.

Moreover, they would indicate that those involved in online religious communicative settings bring with them an already developing religious identity, dependent on the level of experience in religious life in the offline world. Members of these online communities would bring with them their own values and beliefs, and assumptions about their values, beliefs and practices of others in the network. The development of the conditions for social trust will not happen in isolation on the Internet, just as the construction of religious identity of users will not happen exclusively online. That which defines the online religious context, and the rules of interaction in that context, will be challenged and/or complemented by the offline experiences of its members.

This issue is particularly salient for emerging church bloggers, for a variety of reasons. The emerging church movement is not older than the Internet, and in many ways the growth of the movement offline is concurrent with the growth of online settings. Few people are born into the emerging church movement, and many bring into the movement somewhat already established religious identities, and assumptions about the values, beliefs and practices of others. The emerging church exists as a global movement *only online*. Local communities of Christian faith that identify with the emerging church identity have few or insignificant relationships with other communities in other structures or media, compared to other congregations and communities in their locality, diocese, region or synod.

Questions about the emerging church's theological foundations, mission directives, or whether it is in fact a unified movement, are still being asked, or are rejected altogether. "What is the emerging church?" is an important point of discussion for many of its members. So there are no agreed criteria by which an individual or congregation of faithful would be classified as emerging church, other than their declaration.

So when considering religious identity construction online one must take into account that the field of social interaction is filled with assumptions, values and beliefs that are imported by innumerable offline and other online contexts. How these online social settings negotiate how its members create a common understanding of emerging church is a component project for the construction of religious identity of its members.

Before there were web logs there were online discussion groups, email groups, static web pages, chat rooms, bulletin boards and other online forums for social interaction. Web logs, in a number of ways, provide the Internet with a unique social space that impacts on how users interact with others in the World Wide Web.

Blogs are, generally speaking¹, a personal web site, constructed by individuals about *themselves*. Bloggers aim to build an individual identity in their blog pages, and do this through the design of the web site and through the personal discourses they offer in each post. Each blog is, first and foremost, an online entry into the life and times of the blogger, their portrayal of experiences in and view of the world. Unlike chat rooms and discussion boards, users of the site are made aware that the setting of social interaction is owned by a *person*. That is to say, in general, moderation of conversations between those present in the social setting is directed toward the ongoing project of the identity construction of the blogger.

The blogger has a high level of control over the level of interactivity in the blog. Bloggers, depending on their grasp of the technology, have sole power to moderate comments and discussion threads, and to choose who may join in the discussion and even when to stop

¹ There are many blogs that are constructed by groups and organisations, who aim to promote their communal or organisational identity. All blogs in the research sample are authored by individuals or groups, but are considered personal blogs, in that authors represent only themselves and not an outside organisation.

conversations. Given that discussion threads are generated by commenting to a particular post, the conversation starter is always the blogger, who solely chooses the topic of conversation. Therefore, the conditions that create social trust, i.e. the development of the key definition of the situation of social interaction, and the rules of interaction, are primarily the right and responsibility of the one blogger.

Bloggers do not operate in isolation, however. Bloggers read blogs, and make their opinions known on the posts of other bloggers. Networking tools in blogging software (such as trackbacking, tagging and RSS), and web-based programs like Technorati™ and web log aggregators allow for bloggers to follow and contribute to discourses across sites, so that the conditions for social trust are determined by a community of bloggers and collective identity may be developed among many sites of social interaction.

Whether one blog is considered a member of the community of emerging church bloggers is dependent on a myriad of factors that are as fluid and unstructured as the movement itself. Blogging technology provides most of the tools for constructing the communal identity, such as:

- *Tagging* posts within a blog, or the entire blog itself, and sending *pings* to aggregator programs such as Technorati, publicises a blogger's work and identity as adherents or explorers of the movement to other users of the same aggregator program.
- *Trackbacking* a post of a blogger alerts that blogger that a comment has been posted by another blogger on another blog.
- Bloggers can publish a list of other bloggers they read, called a *blogroll*. Bloggers listed on the blogroll may be alerted of this, if it is pinged to the aggregator program they use.

These tools allow for conversations about the emerging church movement to occur across blogs and other sites in the movement's online community. In this way, a multi-blog setting for

interaction becomes known and defined, and bloggers, together with their readers, contribute to an online emerging church community.

The blogosphere, then, presents a setting of social interaction that is layered. The identity construction of a blogger is a reflexive process of interaction with readers and commenters of his or her site, and of interaction with other bloggers whose posts and opinions are connected through hyperlinks. The conditions that create social trust, like the negotiation of rules of interaction, are not imported solely from offline experience, but from negotiations that occur in the network of bloggers.

The emerging church is a movement which is not allied to any particular religious institution, company or locality. There is no foundational statement of doctrine, philosophy or memorandum of understanding that has authority over all who choose to identify with the movement or adopt the label. The emerging church movement also lacks an institutional order, marked by offices or positions of authority, committees, buildings and legal processes. A blogger cannot present him- or herself as a leader or official in the emerging church, without being called into question by the network of bloggers. Emerging church bloggers have, therefore, a lot of freedom to discern and debate by what criteria people can claim such capital. Furthermore, given that the Internet is the only medium in which emerging church is understood as a movement beyond local faith communities, the emerging church blogosphere has great authority in presenting the identity of the emerging church in the offline world.

Approaching the question of identity for an emerging church blogger is to consider how the conditions for social trust is presented and negotiated both within a blog site and between blogs, in the endeavour to reduce “proper distance” between people in the blogosphere and allow for the presentation and construction of authentic religious identity. Since identity in the blogosphere is a discursive project, a discourse analysis is called for.

4.2 Discourse analysis in the emerging church blogosphere

Paul Gee describes discourse as a way of “combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity” (2005: 21). A discourse analysis seeks to comprehend how language works to structure relationships between people, to shape and reshape levels of social organisation, and is used by people within those groupings to build individual identities. I contend therefore that a project that endeavours to understand how people insert themselves into, and consider the meaning of participating in, an emerging church blogosphere, should include a discourse analysis of interaction therein.

Bucholtz and Hall (2005) offer a helpful set of principles for the study of identity through discursive analysis. Three of these have been important for my research. One is the principle of *emergence*. The authors hold to a premise that identity is not static, or based purely on the agency of individuals, but is emergent. That means the identity of an individual or group seeks resolution to tension where contexts of interaction suggests new ideals, values and languages, call people to belong or exile them according to such ideals. For example, individuals’ identities emerge out of belonging to more than one community and/or social networks like, say, a member of a motorcycle club and a club for Jewish single fathers. Ethnic diasporas, for example Indians living in Fiji, are examples of group identities that emerge out of context of tensions between the ideals, values, etc. of original ethnic history and those of contemporary cultural or national setting.

Another is labelled the *indexicality principle*. By this the authors mean how utterances within a discourse contain “(a) overt mention of identity categories and labels; (b) implicatures and presuppositions regarding one’s own or others’ identity position; (c) displayed evaluative and epistemic orientations to ongoing talk, as well as Interactional footings and participant roles; and (d) the use of linguistic structures and systems that are ideologically associated with specific

personas and groups (594).” My study of emerging church bloggers shows a discursive process of such “indexicality” is explicitly made. How to understand and identify with such terms and categories as “emerging”, “postmodern”, “modernist”, “traditional”, “contemporary”, “missional” and even “religious” is an important task of those who enter the emerging church blogosphere, either as author or reader.

The other is the *relationality principle*, in which identities “are intersubjectively constructed through several, often overlapping, complementary relations” between truth and fallacy, similarity and difference, and authority and illegitimacy (598). These are processes also found in explicit terms in blog posts and discussions, around key themes of theology, the authority of scripture, the roles and authority of clergy, the role of the church in social service and justice, and the church’s mission to evangelism.

While Bucholtz and Hall offer a framework for considering how identity is asserted in the language of its user, their principles do not take into account the underlying principle of reflexivity in identity construction. Indeed, in the material to be analysed in this research project, there is a network of relationships, with a yet to be described structure of authority, that constitute a site of interaction.

Scollon and Wong Scollon (2004) note that social action occurs at the intersection of three factors: the interaction order, the discourses in place, and the historical bodies of the participants involved. The authors give the name “nexus analysis” to the study of discourses at this intersection.

The interaction order describes the structure of relationships between participants in the environment in which the interaction takes place (21). In a classroom setting, for example, interaction is structured according to the relationship between a teacher and the students in the class. Communication in a classroom is centred around the teacher, who presents teaching

material to the body of students and receives questions and comments from individual students. While there is communication between students in a classroom, through conversations in whispers and notes passed between desks, these conversations are deprivileged in contrast to the "official" communication of the teacher.

The discourses in place include not just communications between people in the interaction order, but other forms of text that exist in the environment (135). Continuing the example of the classroom setting, these texts may range from posters in walls through the clothing of students to the arrangement of furniture and the use of communication technologies. These discourses inform the physical shape of the interaction order, and which communications are privileged over others. For example, in a classroom where all students are facing the same direction (toward the teacher), communications between students are deprivileged below communications between teacher and student. Likewise, text written behind the teacher (on a chalkboard or projected on a screen, is considered more "official" than text on posters on other walls or written on student desks.

The historical body describes the set of assumptions, skills, values, beliefs and motivations that each participant brings to the setting of the social interaction (25). An example of this would be the desire for retention or promotion within the institution that drives the teacher to deliver a quality performance in the lecture theatre, while some students' attention is dependent on their as yet unfulfilled desire to choose an appropriate major in the degree course. The term "body" as used here may be problematic, as it connotes something physical, and in the physical world we bring our physical bodies into all our interactions. It may be helpful to consider the "historical body" as something like "the body of experience" that comprise part of the context in which interactions occur.

Scollon and Wong Scollon argue that just as each of these factors impinge of the nature and design of the discourses at their intersection, they are likewise not constant. Thus there is a cycle

of change as each factor interacts, which the writers name semiotic cycles. Nexus analysis, then, is the study of how each of these cycles inform and change other cycles to aggregate change in the relationships of people in a setting of interaction, and nature of communication therein. The following is a consideration of how each semiotic cycle is shaped in the blogosphere.

4.2.1 The interaction order

Examining the interaction order involves, as a priority, the structure of discussion between the blogger and his/her audience, either made known through comments, or otherwise perceived but not made known. This structure is in some ways under the control of the blogger, and in other ways controlled by the audience. The technology itself offers limitations and potentialities to both parties. The following are some considerations of the interaction order in the blogosphere.

The blogger “owns” the discussion space. Ultimately, however, the space is controlled by the technology available, including the blogging software, the Internet connection and the space available of the server’s disk. The blogger sets the topic of conversation for the audience, and may choose to allow discussion on a blog post or disable to comment function. Through moderation, the blogger controls the nature of the discourse through moderation. The blogger may make explicit the rules that commenters must adhere to, and delete undesirable comments.

The blogger and commenters participate in a “chain-and-wheel” model: whereby commenters (including the blogger) can respond to any comment made, not just the blogger. Once the blogger has started the conversation, he/she need not be the hub of the discussion wheel. This allows for a freeing of conversations, in that commenters may take a tangent conversation within the comment thread, and a shift in focus from the original topic to the nature of the conversation itself. However, blogging software design privileges the original post of the blogger above the ensuing comments.

The discussion is asynchronous, meaning that commenters may join in the discussion at any time, and a number of conversations may take place within one comment thread. Because participants do not reside in the same physical space, other interactions may be taking place. Face-to-face interactions are taking place with people not engaged in the interaction order. Bloggers and commenters may be engaged in other online conversations on other posts within the same blog, or on other blogs or online discussion forums. Commenters may peruse the blog's many pages and choose to join in any of the multitude of conversations happening or ceased (and archived).

The blogger has no control of who is not participating in the comment thread. Thus, exchanges occur as commenters choose. Commenters may also take information from the blog and make comments on their own blog pages. Thus the interaction order is not just between blogger and audience on the one blog site, but among bloggers on multiple sites, connected by hyperlinks. Hyperlinks are indexical and form part of the text in any online document, rather than simply being a function of connection.

Unlike that between blogger and commenters, the order of interaction between bloggers' sites is more rhizomatic. However the sites of some bloggers may be given authority or privilege over others in a variety of ways, depending on the context in which blog sites are aggregated for readers, including blog reader sites (such as Bloglines or Google Reader) or through search engines such as Technorati.

4.2.2 The historical body

Examining the historical body of the blogger and others involved in online discussions, offers insights into the motivations to participating in the blogosphere. While some information may only be found by interviewing, much data will be present within the blog pages. Information about the historical body of the blogger may be found in previous posts, in the title and subtitle of the blog page (e.g. *fishers, surfers and casters: reflections, reviews and rants of a student faking his way through postgrad research on religion in cyberspace*), in the information made public in

Blogger.com² and Technorati accounts, and in sidebar information (e.g. “What I’m reading”, “Blogs I read”, “CDs I’m listening to”). Hyperlinks in these sections will take the reader to pages within the blogger’s site or other sites read by the blogger. This offers insight into the online world of the blogger.

It may be assumed that the blogger has little edge over the audience in the use of the medium, apart from the controls afforded him/her. It may be assumed that the audience is fully aware of these controls. The medium privileges those skilled in blogging and non-standard forms of discourse.

The blogger may endeavour to assert him/herself as an “expert” in a given topic. Alternatively, a blogger may introduce him/herself to readers as a “newbie” to the conversation, or a comic, or an opponent to what other bloggers may contribute to a conversation topic or theme. The blogger may want to assert that they are contributing something new to the blogosphere, or trying to compile links from what the “experts are saying”. The motivations for blogging are numerous, but are likely to include compiling a journal of personal experiences or of opinions on a set of topics, engaging in a wider conversation within the blogosphere, the promotion of another site in the blogosphere, making online friends, continuing an offline conversation with a group of people (e.g. blogs of offline communities), and the provision of information (see Bortree, 2005; Herring, Kouper et al., 2004; Kaye, 2006)

The historical body of the commenter is not as easily accessible, yet information about the commenter may be offered by the commenter, who chooses to make his/her comment title a hyperlink to one of his/her own sites. Some blogs require commenters register themselves, thus providing information to the blogger. Commenters, like the blogger, bring their experience of

² The online blogging program, Blogger, is named Blogger.com in this paper in order to distinguish it from the term, blogger, used throughout this thesis to refer to people who compose blogs.

audience of other blogs to the discussion. Both blogger and commenters learn the rules for engagement from similar online spaces.

The identity of the commenter may be undisclosed, offering freedom in their engagement in the conversation, though most blogging software requires commenters to add an email address that is made known only to the blogger or comment moderator. This may allow for off-site conversations.

The motivations for commenting are numerous, but are likely to include establishing or encouraging a relationship with the blogger or with other commenters, the promotion of their own blog or site, asserting their own opinions about a set of topics, the provision of ulterior information, and “spamming”, “flaming”, or other behaviour perceived as anti-social (see Bortree, 2005).

4.2.3 Discourses in place

Examining the discourses in place involves recognising the variety of discourses that are brought to the foreground or sent to the background, and the nature of those discourses that are privileged in favour of others. Such discourses may be controlled by the blogger, their audiences, and by the technologies used.

Discourses framed by the blogging technology include:

1. The technology favours short messages in plain conversational language, though bloggers may write in journalistic or academic language.
2. Blog posts are ordered in reverse chronological order. In RSS readers this order may be reversed.
3. Some blogging software provides pages that are not set in the chronology. These pages allow for more lengthy and involved pieces of writings.

4. The blog favours alphabetic text, but also graphic text and video. Links to file sharing sites like Flickr and YouTube enhance these privileges. Commenters normally don't have access to produce anything other than alphabetic text and hyperlinks.
5. Blog posts are framed under a header and between sidebars. Text is controlled only by the blogger in these bars.
6. Colour and graphics are used to provide background and enhance the appearance of the site (as if the blogger is "clothing" the web page content).
7. Hyperlinks provide a structure for perusing/reading the blog. Generally, hyperlinks exist on the sidebars to certain sections of blogs and pages on other sites. Within the posts, hyperlinks are automatically created to send the reader to the comment thread, or to other posts in the original post's "tag"/category.

Discourses controlled by the blogger include:

1. Bloggers have complete control over the discourses in place on their own site, including
 - a. The discussions following their posts
 - b. The text found in the side-bars and header
 - c. The pictures and colour schemes
 - d. The links to other sites
2. Bloggers have the power to privilege discourses on a variety of topics, and discourage other forms of discourse. For example, some bloggers may display their current CD collection in a side-bar, thereby bringing discourses about popular music to the foreground. Some EC bloggers promote books written by other EC bloggers, and encourage conversation about these books in their conversation threads.
3. The sidebar contains hyperlinks to other pages within the blogger's site, or to other sites. These hyperlinks have been established by the blogger, to connect the reader to the

blogger's online world. Many of the linked sites would serve to reinforce the discourses in place in the blogger's site.

4. "Tagging" posts organises posts and discussions outside the chronology into groups of like themes or topics. A reader can then view what the blogger has composed on a certain theme or topic.
5. Tagging also alerts the wider blogosphere that the blogger has written a post on a certain topic. Thus the blogger contributes to a wider conversation, and to a certain discourse surrounding that topic.

Discourses controlled by the audience include:

1. Text present on the computer screen, within the computer room, emanating from the CD player, etc.
2. Text framed by the web browser.
3. Text viewed by the RSS reader or aggregator program (e.g. Technorati), provided by other bloggers.
4. Commenters bring in experiences of engaging in blog discussions from other blogs, online discussion groups, like chat rooms, and textual play.
5. Commenters assert their right to engage in discussions on the nature of the conversations, and what is permissible and not permissible.
6. Commenters are encouraged to be informal in their responses to blog posts. This informality encourages greater social cohesion than would formal academic or journalistic discourse.

An investigation into the construction of religious identity for bloggers involves considering how all the above factors are negotiated in the development of social trust in the design of blog pages, in the interaction between bloggers and commenters, and in the interaction between blogs and

the other blogs they read. How these have been addressed in the presentation and analysis of data is explained in the following sections.

4.3 Approaching the data

These insights have offered the researcher a guide to compose a set of questions with which to address the data collected in the sample (to be outlined later in this chapter). These questions are set in the context of three relationships, in which identity construction is a reflexive process: between the blogger and the blogging technology; between the blogger and their audience; and between the blogger and the blogosphere. They consider identity construction as a discursive practice that involves deliberations of indexicality and relationality. The questions also take into account the interaction order, historical bodies and contextual discourses that frame the three relationships. These questions are not only asked of the printed words in blog posts, but also JPEG, AVI and other embedded audio-visual files in posts, hyperlinks to other places on the Internet, and the design and layout of the blog pages.

4.3.1 Questions of identity

1. What texts (words, symbols, narratives, etc.) has the blogger learned from their experience to help them construct and communicate religious ideas and experiences?
2. How does the blogger use these texts to form a religious identity for themselves?
3. How does the blogger use these texts to form a religious identity for the emerging church?
4. How does the blogger construct an emerging church identity through:
 - a. The assertion of ideas, statements and stories as true (or its opposite, fallacious) sentiments about emerging church identity?
 - b. The assertion of ideas, statements and stories as being like (or its opposite, foreign to) others within the emerging church membership?

- c. The assertion of certain voices as authoritative (or its opposite, flawed) speakers for the emerging church movement?

4.3.2 Questions of reflexivity

Questions of the interaction order

1. What values and assumptions does the blogger have about the nature of the Internet and the blogging that may inform their interaction with the technology?
2. What does the blogger know about the audience that reads and interacts with their work, and how does the blogger respond to that knowledge?
3. What conversations and debates are occurring in the emerging church blogosphere that attracts the blogger to contribute to?

Questions of the historical body

1. What motivates the blogger to produce work on the Internet?
2. What does the blogger want to get out of their relationship with their readership?
3. What does the blogger want to get out of their contributions to global emerging church conversations and debates?
4. By what authority does the blogger allow themselves to join these conversations and debates?

Questions of the discourses in place

1. What other discourses are in place that may impact the blogger's contributions online (e.g. other programs running on the computer desktop, items in their office or home, offline blog writing programs)?
2. What discourses may be involved in the reading of blogs (e.g. web browsers, RSS aggregators)?

4.3.3 Questions of connection

A network analysis of blogs in the sample will provide quantitative data of connections between them. Using *NodeXL*, a Microsoft Excel add-in program, connections between bloggers will be counted according to bloggers' comments in other sites in the sample, and hyperlinked references to any of the sample's sites in bloggers' posts. At the commencement of the research project, similar data from bloggers' blogrolls was also considered, but this researcher declined to use this data because (a) only 8 sites had blogrolls in one sample period, and (b) some of this data had been corrupted by the researcher's storage device.

These questions will be asked of the information collected from the network analysis:

1. What is the relationship between the network of connections between bloggers online and their known offline relationships, such as denominational ties, geographic vicinity, and involvement in other offline networks?
2. What is the relationship between the network of connections between bloggers and their discursive construction of the network?

4.4 Gathering the data

4.4.1 Identifying the sample of blogs

Initially thirty different blogs were to be studied. It was hoped that the authors of identified blogs would comprise a sample containing a fair mix of sex, age, denomination and geographic spread. Of the thirty, it was hoped that at least ten would be authored by female bloggers, ten bloggers would be under 25, that at least six denominations would be represented, and that at least one blog came from each Australian state.

In April 2006, the following keywords were entered into the Technorati search engine: "emerging church", "emergent church" and "postmodern church". Over 150 blogs were identified in the

search, ordered according to their “authority”. Only twenty blogs came from Australians, though two were authored by American nationals who were living in Australia at the time, and one by an American who had only recently moved back to the USA from Sydney, and many of his posts were of experiences in that city. One blogger in the sample was Australian, yet living in Asia. Of these twenty, only one was written by a woman, though one was authored by a male-female couple. It appeared that though many of these twenty were written by members of the Australian Baptist Church, the Churches of Christ and the Uniting Church in Australia, others were also represented. It could not be determined at the time the ages of bloggers identified here.

In the 2004 study, *Women and Children Last*, Herring, Kouper et al. found that the difference in number between blogs authored by males and by females in the general blogosphere was relatively small. However, when they divided the study between *types* of blogs, the results were quite different. The types they identified were filter blogs (blogs that locate and review other web sites), knowledge blogs (or k-logs: blogs focussing on alerting audiences to new information in a variety of topics and fields, mainly technology), online journals (where authors reflect on daily life) and blogs that fit in more than one of the previous categories. Their study showed that the first two types of blogs were significantly more likely to be authored by men than women, and that the opposite is true for the third type (Herring, Kouper et al., 2004). I have found that this trend is true for emerging church blogs, where women-authored blogs are, generally, more likely to be reflection on personal spiritual beliefs and practices, while male-authored blogs tend to include reflections, opinions and arguments on regional and global issues experienced by the Christian church and the emerging church movement therein. Male-authored blogs, therefore, are more likely to be referenced by other bloggers in their reflections and arguments, and so are more likely to receive “authority rankings” by search engines like Technorati.

These assertions are confirmed by Harp and Tremayne (2006), who propose that certain blogs are given privilege of becoming network “hubs” in a linked blogosphere, by either the content of their

posts or the length of their stay in the blogosphere. They contend that while presently female-authored blogs may comprise at least half of the entire blogosphere, older blogs tend to be male-authored. Secondly, while women's talk of public issues is on the increase, they may be seen by men in the blogosphere as falling outside their narrow definitions of public discourse, for example, costs of health care and child care, rather than what political officials are saying from political pulpits (250-259). Thus, while "the Internet may offer access to a public sphere, an intellectual, patriarchal hegemony exists" (259).

Given this insight, the researcher believed it important to seek other blogs authored by women, in order to achieve both to diminish the imbalance of gender among bloggers in the sample, and to ensure blogs sampled are not solely those high in the list of authority rankings. During April and May 2006 six blogs were identified that were authored by women who either appeared on the blogrolls of sites of the original twenty, or who were regular commenters on some of these twenty blogs. An ongoing search of Delicious tags (by way of RSS feed) was also monitored during these months. Of these six, four blogs were deemed unsuitable for the sample, as they appeared to read only one blog in the sample (according to their blogrolls), or refrain from mention of religious talk in their posts. The other two were added to the sample.

Initially three sample periods were considered. That is, posts from certain time periods would be collected for the data sample, plus comments. The time periods considered were 1 July – 31 October 2006, 1 February – 31 May 2007 and 1 November 2007 – 31 January 2008. Comments entered up to 28 days after the post publication are included, as are the design/layout of the blogs' front pages on the last day of each period.

The rationale behind this decision to have three non-consecutive sample periods was threefold. Firstly, blogs may be discontinued either temporarily or permanently during any time period. Thus having separate time periods would allow some blogs to enter the sample should others leave. Secondly, it was assumed that particular conversations may occur over Christmas and

Easter that would add interesting data to the collection. Thirdly, extending sample periods over 19 months could show longitudinal trends without producing too much data. However, after collecting data over this time it was realised that an insurmountable amount of data was collected, and it was concluded that data from only the first two planned periods would provide sufficient data and be adequate for the study..

The sample of blogs is as follows:

BLOG NAME	URL	USERNAME OF AUTHOR(S)	SAMPLE PERIODS
[hold :: this space]	alternative.victas.uca.org.au	Cheryl	First and second
Neurotribe.net	www.neurotribe.net/blog	Stephen	First and second
A churchless faith	achurchlessfaith.blogspot.com	Chris	First and second
A foot in both places	afootinbothplaces.wordpress.com	Tim	First and second
Aropax(R) Nation	aropaxnation.blogspot.com	Dave	First
If I ever feel better	ifieverfeelbetter.com	Dave	Second
Backyard missionary	backyardmissionary.com	Hamo and Grendel (guest post author)	First
Breathing space	breathing-space.blogspot.com	Eddie	First and second
Circle of pneuma	circleofpneuma.blogspot.com	Philjohnson	First and second
Eclectic itchings	mattstone.blogs.com	Matt	First
Journeys in between	mattstone.blogs.com	Matt	Second
emergingBlurb	emergingblurb.blogspot.com	Garth	First and second
Exploring	gregtheexplorer.wordpress.com	Greg the explorer	First

emerging			
embracing			
Fernando's desk	fernandogros.com	Fernando	First and second
Jen's musings	jen-reed-candid.blogspot.com	Jen	First and second
Lionfish	underneathejetty.blogspot.com	Lionfish	First
Living Room >> A space for life	www.livingroom.org.au/blog	Darren Rowse	First and second
Missional diatribe	missionaldiatribe.blogspot.com	Andrew	First and second
Mountain masala	craigmitchell.typepad.com/mountain_masala	Craig	First and second
No diggity	diggerrandle.com	Digger	First and second
No guarantees	noguarantees.blogspot.com	Vawz	First and second
Notyetfinished	notyetfinished.blogspot.com	Andy	First and second
Pacific highlander	pacifichighlander.postkiwi.com	Duncan	First and second
Planet telex	planettelex.bur.st	Darren	First and second
Random murmurings	random-murmurings.typepad.com/ random_murmurings/	Linzc	Second
Random thoughts by Chris	randomthoughtsbychris.blogspot.com	Chris Logan	First
Saintgaz strikes back	saintgazstrikesback.blogspot.com	Gaz	First and second
Signposts	signposts.org.au	Phil, Dan and Lionfish (guest post author)	First and second
SmuloSpace	johnsmulo.com	John Smulo	First

The forgotten ways	forgottenways.org/blog	Alan	Second
The merry rose	themerryrose.blogspot.com	Themerryrose	Second
The rev	reverendjohn.blogspot.com	The Rev	First and second
The X facta	xfacta.blogspot.com	Kel	First and second
TheGeoffre(y)port	geoffreport.com/wp/	Geoff	First and second
Urban stone	urbanstone.blogspot.com	Andrew Johnson	First and second
World Changers	steveaddison.net	Steve	First and second
Table 1: List of blogs in the sample study			

Of the blogs identified here, all may be found on any Internet search. While registering a username and password may be required to contribute a comment to a site, there were no restrictions from the general public to open and read either articles or comments posted on the sites. For the purposes of this research, all information found on these sites are considered public documentation.

Backyard missionary, *Exploring emerging and embracing*, and *Lionfish* are not included in the second sample period, and *Random murmurings* is not included in the first period, because the authors did not contribute any posts to their sites in these times. Though the author of *Lionfish* did not post to his own site in the second sample period, he was a “guest author” in *Signposts* in both sample periods. *Random thoughts by Chris* is authored by a USA national who was living in Australia during the first sample period, but had moved out of the country since then, so only posts in the first period were recorded. Similarly, *SmuloSpace* is authored by an American who had only recently moved returned to California from New South Wales before the commencement of the first period, and many posts are written about his experiences in Australia. Therefore the blog is included only in the first sample. Both blogs receive much readership and comments from other Australian bloggers in the sample. *The Rev* is authored by an American

living in Melbourne throughout both periods, and shows much communication with other bloggers in the sample. *The forgotten ways* and *The merry rose* were discovered late in the project, and were only included in the second sample. The author Matt changed the title of his blog from *Eclectic itchings* to *journeys in between*, as did user Dave from *Aropax(R) Nation* to *If I ever feel better* in between sample periods.

For the remainder of this thesis, quotations taken from blog posts and comments will be accompanied by an in-line citation naming the post's or comment's author and the date of publication. An endnote reference will inform the reader of the website on which the quotation was found. Noting that some direct links to posts and comments ("permalinks") have moved, and that much data has been removed from the Internet between the collection of data and the thesis' production, URLs are not included in these references. It is assumed that the URLs provided in Table 1 offer sufficient information regarding the location of blog data.

4.4.2 Sorting the data

In the two sample periods the sample's bloggers collectively published a little over 1500 posts that generated almost 5900 comments from 770 readers. Of these posts and comments, less than 3350 were considered relevant for investigation. Discarded data comprised:

1. Posts not containing religious discussion. Posts discussing popular music, games, technology, sport, parenting and home renovation were numerous and lacked any mention of Christianity, religion, spirituality or the emerging church movement.
2. Comments submitted by readers who are not bloggers in the sample. Since the investigation focuses more on bloggers' interaction with their audience than the content of audience's responses, only those comments that elicited an explicit response from bloggers were retained for study.

The discarded data belies any perception created that the blogs in the sample contain only explicitly religious content. Indeed bloggers freely write on a plethora of topics remotely related to religion or religious life. The removed data also falsifies any notion that the sample's bloggers only write for each other, but recognise a large and diverse readership. Indeed, the discarded data would be of use to the investigation, providing examples of exercises in building social trust among bloggers. It may also be debated that posts about music, sport and technology also contribute toward an understanding of one's religious identity (for example, the "religious" fanaticism towards a football team, or how ambient music creates a "heavenly" atmosphere). However, the researcher has found that much of this information is already found in posts and comments kept for investigation.

During the sample periods printed text in blogs and comments were copied and pasted into Microsoft Word files, that were then exported to an analysis software package called NVivo. If graphics, videos or audio files were embedded in these posts and comments, a link to their Internet locations were saved in the program. Using NVivo as a qualitative analysis tool, posts and comments, as well as associated embedded files and links, were sorted into the following nodes:

Statements about religion

- *Statements about theology*, i.e. statements about God, Jesus or Christ, Spirit, and the nature of Christian life and discipleship.
- *Statements about the Church's mission and evangelism*, i.e. statements about the Church's, or its ministers' and members' life and work with people, both inside and out of the Church.
- *Statements about church structure and authority*, e.g. statements about the role of clergy and paid staff, power relations within the Church, its use of money.

- *Social commentary*, i.e. responses to social, political, cultural and moral issues, e.g. the activities of governments and politicians, environmental issues, marriage and sexual relationships, etc.
- *Statements about Scripture*, including comments about Biblical interpretations, and uses of Scripture quotations in other statements.
- *Statements about faith practices*, including statements about personal and communal prayer, reproductions of poetry and liturgy, and statements about contemporary worship.

Conversations with audiences

- *Statements of care and support* between the blogger and commenters.
- *Statements of rules of interaction*, including responses to flammers and spammers, and mediation of arguments between audience members.
- *Statements of dialogue and debate*, i.e. how the blogger engages with commenters who agree or disagree with the blogger's point of view.
- *Statements of the blogger's own site and blogging activity*, i.e. alerts to readers about features and changes of design in the site, or about present and future blogging activity.
- *Statements of redundancy*, i.e. utterances of welcome and thanks to those who make comment on the blog, invitations to the readership to make comments on posts, and other statements that may be considered "blogging etiquette".

Interaction with other sites

- *Allocations of authority*, i.e. promotion of information on other web sites in which the blogger gives some authority or appreciation.
- *Engagement in emerging church debates*, including responses to statements made on other blogs about the identity and growth of the emerging church.

- *Presentations of the Internet and blogosphere*, i.e. the blogger's consideration of the Internet as a resource, tool, place or network.

In many instances the blogger may place the post within a certain category or label within the blog's structure, or may attribute a post or statement a Technorati or del.icio.us tag. Such tags and labels may be named "emerging church", "theologically speaking", "about ministry", etc. this researcher considered these tags and labels when coding data, as they indicated the blogger's intent to do likewise, and insert the post or statement in cross-blog discussions of the same nature or topic.

The categories listed under the heading "statements of religion" were identified in a trial run three months before the commencement of the first sample period, where a reading of blog posts and a listing of tags and categories showed that all statements about Christianity, the emerging church, or religion in general would fall in at least one of these six descriptive categories. Sub-categories that follow emerged out of a reading of posts and comments in the sample period. The categories listed under the next two headings were identified in a reading of the data during the sample periods. Intuitively, many posts and comments contain information that fit into more than one category, and so are coded in multiple nodes.

Using NVivo and NodeXL

The NVivo program helped arrange the data appropriately. Over the course of the sample periods, posts and comments (including URLs of pictures and videos) were copied and pasted from the blog sites on to a MS Word documents. There was one MS word document for each different blog site in each sample. The researcher gave each article and comment a heading, which was the username of the post's or comment's author. The documents were then imported into the NVivo program. The program then arranged each article and comment found according

to the name mentioned on the heading. Thus the program was able to arrange posts and comments automatically by username.

The researcher added other codes to the documents manually. Each post and comment was first given one of three codes: religious text (i.e. a post or comment about religion, Christianity or the emerging church movement); social commentary (i.e. posts or comments about politics, social responsibility, justice or morality); statements about bloggers and their audience (i.e. texts presenting care and support for readers, posts about what the audience can next expect from the blogger, texts about behaviour online or about responses to breaches of codes of conduct); and statements about the Internet and the emerging church blogosphere. NVivo automatically grouped posts and comments in each code and arranged them according to the blog site from which they came.

Each of these groups (called nodes) contained a massive amount of data, and it was evident that information in each node was vast and diverse. Thus religious text was coded further into statements about theology, statements about relationships between churches and other groups of people, statements about faith practices (including prayers and hymns), statements about interpretation of Scripture and statements about relationships between people inside the church (including statements about leadership, denominationalism, etc).

Even these nodes were coded further. Statements about theology were organised according to statements about church doctrine, text regarding God, Jesus, Spirit and Trinity, statements about faith and doubt, about what discipleship means to bloggers and commenters, and statements about methods of theological inquiry. Texts concerning the church's relationships with others were broken down into statements about the church's relationship with people of other faiths, mission and evangelism activities and church-based programs, statements about religious advertising (on television, billboards, etc), and texts and conversations regarding motivations for mission and evangelism. Posts and comments about faith practices were coded again into

statements about corporate worship practices, presentations of original work in liturgy and music, bloggers' and commenters' opinions about traditional and contemporary Christian music, bloggers' sharing of private practices, and statements about blogging as personal religious practice. Posts and comments about church structures and leadership were coded again into conversations about business practices in the church, what leaders do and should do, men and women in leadership and conversations about the culture wars between the mainstream and contemporary churches.

The data found in the node labelled "relationship between bloggers and the audience" was also broken down, into conversations of care and support for bloggers and commenters, codes of conduct, responses to breaches, statements that show how bloggers and commenters engage in disagreements, and redundant statements (such as welcomes and thanks, announcements made by bloggers about their own sites, supplications made by bloggers to engage readers to make comments). Texts containing codes of conduct were broken down again into bloggers' responses to anonymous comments, flaming, spamming, statements about profane language, assertions of codes of conduct for post authors and statements about protecting privacy.

Posts and comments coded in the social commentary node were coded again into a further 17 nodes, including statements about war, the Australian government and its politicians, consumerism, environmentalism, sexual orientation, popular culture and television, crime and prisons, issues about race and racism, and refugees.

Texts coded into the node labelled "relationship between the blogger and the wider Internet" were also coded further into statements about debates and doctrines for the emerging church online, promotion of other bloggers, authority ranking in the blogosphere, and values that bloggers and commenters make about the Internet.

Since all these nodes were created and compiled manually, the researcher desired to ensure texts had not been overlooked. NVivo enabled automatic coding, according to word and phrase searches. Such searches were conducted: “emerging church”, “emergent church”, “missional”, “authority”, “leadership”, “theology”, “theological”, “blogging”, “Evangelical”, “mega-church”, “Protestant” and “mainstream”. The data arranged in each node was then removed from the node and placed in one or more of the manually-added nodes, as appropriate.

NVivo was able to count the number of time a blogger had made a comment in another site. This was helpful in collecting the appropriate data for a network study. The researcher used NodeXL, an add-in for Microsoft Excel spread sheets. Four spread sheets were created. One for comments made in each sample period, and one for hyperlinks created between two of the sample’s blog sites, for each sample period. In each spread sheet, three columns were created. The first column listed either the author of a comment or the source of a hyperlink. The second column listed either the site in which the comment appears or the destination site of the hyperlink (i.e. the site to which the hyperlink points), so that each row in the spread sheets represented a connection between one blogger and another. The third column listed either the number of comments, or the number of links, in each relationship. On another page within the spread sheet file, the list of bloggers was copied and four other columns were added, so each blogger was coded according to four characteristics: whether they are male or female (or a male-female team); the denomination from which they originate or now belong to; whether they are a professional in a religious setting; and the state in which they live, or, if now living overseas, the state from which they have left. NodeXL then created graphs of networks where blog sites were represented by “vertices” and the connection between the sites were represented by arrows heading from one vertex to another. The number of comments of hyperlinks in each connection was then graphically represented by the width of the arrow. Attributes of each bloggers (e.g. their sex, the state in which they live, etc.) could then be graphically represented by assigning different colours or shapes to each vertex.

4.4.3 Interviews

Not all the information needed to address the above questions may be found in online text. Thus interviews have been conducted with bloggers. All bloggers in the sample were invited to take part in an interview, either by email (which the blogger publicly displayed on their site) or by making a comment on a blog post (outside a sample period). Twenty-six bloggers responded positively to the invitation. The questions asked were:

Demographic information

1. Your sex
2. Your age (month and year of birth)
3. Education level (type of qualification if tertiary)
4. Occupation
5. Religious affiliation and level of participation/role
6. Your postcode

Questions about blogging habits and resources

1. Where and when do you usually blog?
 - a. What else are you doing at your computer at this time?
 - b. What is your Internet connection speed and limit?
2. What kind of computer do you use? What web browser?
3. Why do you use the blogging software?
4. Tell me how you got into blogging.

Questions about their blog and its audience

1. Why the title and picture?
2. Tell us about your category titles.
3. Who is your audience and what are you wanting to achieve with them?
4. What other blogs do you read and what influence do you think they have on your blogging?

Questions about the emerging church

1. Tell me how you've become interested in the emerging church.
2. What is your take on the emerging church movement?

All participants read and signed agreements for the researcher to use information shared in the interviews, according to ethical procedure laid out in a plain language statement offered them. Before interviews began, interviewees were alerted to the suspicion that, while real names and other identifying information would not be shared in the research, readers of the thesis may well also be readers of their blogs, and may recognise statements from interviews presented herein. All interviewees have allowed for their username to be presented alongside statements given by them, so that readers may cross-reference statements from interviews with their reading of blogs. A condition of this allowance has been that they are offered, by email, to view what has been attributed to their username in the data presented.

Interviews either took place in person or via Skype, an Internet telephone service. Their voices were recorded on a portable digital audio device, and recording were stored as .mp3 files. All participants have received a copy of the record file, either through post on a CD-ROM or audio CD, or accessed via a file transfer protocol (FTP) to the researcher's private web site. The FTP was

password protected, and record files on the site were deleted after the researcher was notified that the file had been downloaded by the participant.

NVivo was also used to store and organise data collected from interviews. Particular nodes created were regarding bloggers' own blogging practice, the reasons why they blog, how they decided on the title of their blog, and any design choices they made, what information they knew about their audience and how they get that information, the blogs that they read and what attracts them to these blogs, and their opinions about the emerging church movement (including what they think about being considered an emerging church blogger by this researcher and other bloggers in the sample).

4.5 Researcher as blogger – potentials and limits of reflexive research

In 2001, I received a Bachelor of Theology from the Melbourne College of Divinity. Though educated in theology, my interests have mostly been in how people use media to create and share information about faith and religion, and use mass media to formulate personal religious identities. Therefore I have been quite literate in theological and doctrinal conversations and perspectives presented in the research. Due to this, I am aware that much of the information presented in this thesis is in the form of discrete theological discourse, and recognise my tendency to present information in that form.

I was introduced to emerging church dialogue in blogs back in 2002, while conducting research on religion in popular film. While I agreed with many of the perspectives presented in conversations in these blogs, I did not connect with any of the bloggers or endeavour to become involved in any emerging church conversations or activities.

At the beginning of this research project I started a blog titled, *Fishers, surfers and casters*, hosted at <http://teusner.org>. The blog contained reflections on my review of the literature, reflections on

information gathered from interviews with bloggers in the sample, presentations given at conferences and sections and chapters from the thesis as it was being built. The initial purposes of the blog were to make connections with and cultivate feedback from other researchers in the field, and to generate involvement in the research from those bloggers being studied. Indeed, creating a blog about my research that was read by people being investigated was intended to maximise my reception of the ideas and opinions of those bloggers interviewed, while at the same time allowing the bloggers' control over their own input. The idea proved somewhat fruitful, as informants chose to continue conversations from their interviews via email, offering responses to information seen in the research blog.

There were unsurprising yet problematic effects created by the blog. Firstly, *Fishers, surfers and casters* is listed on a small number of blogrolls in the sample, showing that the sample identify my blog as a source of information about the emerging church identity. Secondly, a number of posts on my blog have been referenced on the sample's blogs during sample periods. The easiest response to this instance is to simply remove them from the sample of information, however this removes other potentially useful information lying in the post, and ignores the notion that the post, like all pieces of a whole, is not read in isolation, but is potentially connected to other texts to generate important meanings. Thirdly, some bloggers reflected openly on their experience of the interview in blog posts and invited discussion. While the information lying in these posts are welcome additions to the data collected, it highlights that this researcher is unable to study an object without changing it. Thus it will be important for me to note that some data presented in this thesis has been produced as a direct response to my interest in it.

5.0 Data

This chapter exposes some of the data made available in the sample's web sites and interviews that present individual blogging identities, and relationships between bloggers that contribute to the growth of a communal emerging church blogging identity. First the researcher will show how bloggers present a religious identity in their posts and comments. Secondly, the chapter will explore how communication behaviour in blogs is negotiated, including bloggers' understanding of social and anti-social behaviour, and their response to authority and popularity rankings of themselves and other bloggers. Thirdly, a network analysis will show how bloggers are connected to each other, and suggest how connections are made. Lastly, information about bloggers and blogging as received through interviews will be introduced.

A concise paper prevents the researcher from showing all posts and comments relating to the various topics presented. This chapter, however, will endeavour to show the breadth of opinion on any given matter. For consistency and in order to honour the bloggers, spelling, grammar and syntax errors will be preserved, unless incomprehensible without correction.

5.1 Posts and comments about religion

In this section, the researcher will expose the religious beliefs and opinions of bloggers as made apparent in their posts and conversations. These are grouped into the following topics: theology and doctrine; scripture; the Church's mission in the world; leadership, Church structure and authority; Christian perspectives on social and moral issues; and individual and communal faith practices.

5.1.1 Theology

It appears that blogs offer the authors a space to review theological stances and doctrines that come to their attention, say in their local churches, or in the news, or reading other blogs and

websites. Together some bloggers aim to build an alternative theological framework. In considering theology, four call it “emerging”, “missional” or “postmodern”, but the rest refer simply to their personal beliefs, attitudes and questions. By-and-large, bloggers believe in the triune God composed of creator of the universe (though they are far from creationist), redeemer of humanity, and the Spirit who moves among us. They tend to shy away from the gender-specific terms of Father and Son, preferring simply God and Jesus or Christ.

From a reading of posts and comments it appears that two tenets of the Christian faith remain central to the theology of these emerging church bloggers. An example of the first is given here by Linzc, that belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus, is a starting point for knowing who God is and who people are in relation to God.

It seems to me that the story of the resurrection in the tradition is absolutely vital, because it speaks of God’s guarantee of the possibility of resurrection for the kinds of people you refer to - those oppressed by civic and religious power, those isolated and shunned by society, those in need of an encounter with grace. (Linzc, 15 March 2007)¹

The second, that God is three persons in one, is expressed in this example by Matt.

Now, I in no way wish to disparage the search of any of my esoteric Christian or Unitarian Universalist readers in saying all this, you're entitled to make your own faith decisions. But to my trinitarian Christian readers I say this: if we fail to clearly articulate that trinitarianism is an essential aspect of the

¹ Linzc (2007). Comment in "sidesliding". Posted 15 March 2007 in Cheryl, *[hold :: this space]*.

Emerging Church, one day we'll wake up and it really won't be. (Matt, 8 July 2006)²

Other doctrines are up for discussion among these bloggers. When presented with the idea of God creator as omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent, an all-loving God is seen as a more important concept than an all-powerful one. Chris asserts in his response to having visited the website of the comedy show, *Mr Deity*.

From a theological perspective I find it interesting because I think much of the humor of the show rests on the idea that God is "all powerful and all knowing" that is God is in control of everything and God knows exactly what is going to happen in the future. These are two things that I do not believe and I explore this in the weeks to come [...] (Chris, 27 April 2007)³

It follows atonement theology is problematic. Bloggers question why God would require sacrifice, and suggest other reasons for the crucifixion of Christ. Here is an example from Cheryl's blog.

Redemption is getting back freedom from those stories, from that way of perceiving myself. It's discovering i am more than the story by which i know myself - and that others are more than the story by which they know themselves, and by which i know them.

[Of course, that discovery (the knowing) is only the hint of redemption. The reality of redemption is when we let ourselves and others actually live in that freedom.]

² Matt (2006). "Emerging Language Appropriation." *Eclectic itchings*. Posted 8 July 2006.

³ Chris (2007). "Mr Deity and a few Theological Reflections." *A churchless faith*. Posted 27 April 2007.

(I've not used this language before, bear with me.) I think Jesus bought that freedom, but not by hanging on a cross (though that was the final, inevitable result of it). He bought it by having his feet washed by a woman of questionable reputation (of course, every time we say she might have been a prostitute we enslave her again), by recognising the humanity of both a greedy tax collector and a criminal. He bought freedom for people, but not because God needed it be bought (our freedom is already at the very heart of God). Jesus didn't pay for it on my behalf to God, he paid for it on behalf of the rest of us (me) who normally aren't prepared to pay what it costs to let someone else be free. (Cheryl, 14 February 2007)⁴

The cross makes more sense as an indication of the extreme love of God, to endure the worst of human experience, even if that takes the form of abandonment from God. Prosperity theology makes even less sense to them, and is highlighted in posts and discussions across sixteen sites, as it not only lacks sufficient biblical evidence, but appears in its application to serve the higher classes more than the poor. And they believe God has a preferential option for the poor.

I really enjoyed engaging with a post written by Kim Fabricius called Ten propositions on political theology. I've quote some of it below as a taster, the whole thing is certainly worth a read.

"2. God is political – and God takes sides. In the Old Testament, Yahweh's exodus and covenant "bias / preferential option for the poor" is now a well-worn phrase – but an undeniable fact. And the New Testament – Luke in particular – doesn't drop the ball: the Magnificat and the Jubilee Manifesto suggest the game plan.

⁴ Cheryl (2007). "on redemption." [*hold :: this space*]. Posted 14 February 2007.

4. With a shrug of their shoulders, conservatives love to quote the text, “You always have the poor with you” (Mark 14:7), as if poverty were an order of creation (cf. “the rich man in his castle, / the poor man at his gate”), and there is nothing we can – or should – do about it. But Jesus was not being cynical, or even realistic, about the inevitability of an excluded underclass, rather he was reminding his disciples where they will be found if they are faithful – among the poor and oppressed.” (Tim, 29 May 2007)⁵

Indeed, God has a politic. Doctrines of heaven and hell are at best unhelpful, at worst systems of control and oppression. For the most part, doctrines about the afterlife detract from the more important concerns about living as Christians in the present. Digger and Cheryl provide examples.

What do you reckon of this quote, found it the other day, from Brian

McLaren, really got me thinking

"This is, one of the huge problems is the traditional understanding of hell.

Because if the cross is in line with Jesus' teaching then—I won't say, the only,

and I certainly won't say even the primary—but a primary meaning of the

cross is that the kingdom of God doesn't come like the kingdoms of the this

world, by inflicting violence and coercing people. But that the kingdom of

God comes through suffering and willing, voluntary sacrifice. But in an ironic

way, the doctrine of hell basically says, no, that that's not really true. That in

the end, God gets His way through coercion and violence and intimidation

and domination, just like every other kingdom does. The cross isn't the

⁵ Tim (2007). "Thinking through political theology." *A foot in both places*. Posted 29 May 2007.

center then. The cross is almost a distraction and false advertising for God."

(Digger, 26 September 2006)⁶

Much of the conversation about Christianity as the only way to salvation has revolved around the question of life after death – Christianity being the one way for people to receive the promise of eternal life. I need to say, for any of the following to make sense, that I have no understanding of life beyond death. It's never been part of my faith or world view. So having removed that question (fear?) from the equation, the primary question of faith for me is how do we encounter justice, hope, grace, redemption and love in the world.

The question I keep coming back to, then, is whether it matters that people are leaving the church and Christian faith, if what they are leaving them for is something that offers life (and which in turn transforms them to live in a way that brings life to the world). I don't think it matters. What it comes down to for me, I guess, is believing that Christianity points towards redemption and transformation, rather than being the only way people can find it. Believing this doesn't diminish the beauty or truth within Christian faith, or the redemption, grace and transformation found through it, but it also affirms a very strong belief that redemption, grace and transformation doesn't stop at the 'end' of Christianity. (Cheryl, 2 February 2007)⁷

⁶ Digger (2006). Comment to "God is just like the Gestapo?". Posted 26 September 2006 in Chris, *A churchless faith*.

⁷ Cheryl (2007). "filling in some gaps." [*hold :: this space*]. Posted 2 February 2007.

While Christ is the head of the Kingdom, this Kingdom is not the Christian church. The church is tasked with bringing the Gospel to the world, and ushering in the new realm, but being close to God, participating in the Kingdom, is not conditional on belonging to a church, or even being Christian. Emerging/missional theology accepts that much of God's word and work can be found in secular culture, and these bloggers find that church culture is failing to speak the Gospel. Even contemporary methods of academic theology are criticised as serving to alienate rather than empower people to talk of God.

Mary Hess (Tensegrities) made a very interesting comment here recently, "...historical theology has far too narrowly conceived what we mean by theology, and in doing so cut huge numbers of people out of the conversation."

I think Mary is right. That is an example of how theology is broken - broken in the sense that Seth Godin talks about in this talk at the Gel 2006 conference. [...]

Theologians who blog, who write at a popular level, who comment meaningfully on everyday life and current matters go a long way towards fixing that break in theology and church. But I don't think that is enough. Maybe theology is overspecialised and self-referential. Maybe, churches prioritise the voices of their clergy too much. Maybe the way we publish and who we publish is wrong. Maybe we listen too infrequently to Christians who are working in culture, media and politics? Maybe we need to spend more time in the world and less time being told what the world looks like? (Fernando, 22 August 2006)⁸

⁸ Fernando (2006). "Broken Churches, Broken Theology." *Fernando's desk*. Posted 22 August 2006.

Bloggers do not claim that this theology is new and make references to other sources such as the Jesus movement, the works of GK Chesterton, NT Wright and CS Lewis, whom they claim speak well to postmodern culture, in which they are embedded. Their claim to being “postmodern” lies in their language of “doubt”. For postmodern theology, doubt is an essential component to faith. In the following instance, Garth suggests his problems with the construction of religious “Truth”, and Chris proposes that doubt is not only permissible, but an important component of faithful living.

For me its when we talk about little t truth that subjectivity begins. As a Christian I maintain that Truth is bigger than us and I find the modernist principles quite condescending to Truth when they argue "Well if 'A' is true then it follows that 'B' is true also" type of stuff.

Truth doesn't have to be contained by our feeble systems, although our feeble systems are all we have so they become inetersting theoretical pursuits for gaining new perspectives. They give us anchors but Truth will not be held accountable to our systems for it is the reality we encounter....not the reality we define. (Garth, 5 July 2006)⁹

I guess I'm on of the postmodern Xns that Tom Lyberg speaks about when he says...

"Slowly some postmodern Xns are rediscovering the Jesus who yelled at God for abandoning him on the cross. They're connecting with the frightened unbelieving disciples who ran from the first sign of trouble. They understand the words of the ancient spiritual giants who questioned God's very

⁹ Garth (2006). Comment to "Science, proofs and miracles". Posted 5 July 2006 in Garth, *emergingBlurb*.

existence and affirmed it at the same time"

The best travelers are the one's who know that they are in a unknown territory and that they don't know everything and that they want to learn as much as you can from everyone else. In turn these are the sort of people that other travelers will come asking questions of. So if you doubt that you know everything relax, celebrate even and keep traveling. (Chris, 7 July 2006)¹⁰

To summarise the sample's view of doctrine, bloggers like to ask whether theological stances are helpful in the promotion of peace, justice and reconciliation. Bloggers claim that worldviews will always and repeatedly be challenged and broken. Bloggers celebrate that all the spiritual traveller has is the affirmation that Jesus has been in that brokenness before, and God is there now. When modern Christians appear to bloggers like Roman soldiers casting dice at the crucifixion, postmodern Christians want to be like the disciples who run away, only to return to the resurrected Christ with both shame and delight. The Rev makes this point clear here.

There are things in postmodernism that not quite correct in my opinion, but as a movement it seems to me to be more in keeping with the radical, subversive and somewhat mystical Christ of the bible.

One of the main critiques of these types is the refusal of some men to make concrete statements about things. But when you opinions on things have been rocked so much, and changed so much in the last decade or so, you are a lot less likely to say, "this is the absolute truth and it will never change" because thats what you thought before you changed. Where I stand on the issue of homosexuality is different from where I stood ten years ago. So is it

¹⁰ Chris (2006). "Celebrating Doubt Vs Two Ways to Live." *A churchless faith*. Posted 7 July 2006.

any wonder I don't want to be tied down to a absolute statement now?

It seems like the phrase we see through a glass and that darkly, actually means, we know everything completely and in its entirety, to some of these people. The emerging church people in my opinion are just being honest and saying I am not sure about everything, but I know the answer is Jesus. (The Rev, 10 September 2006)¹¹

Dave offers the story of living with doubt in the presence of other Christians who seemed comfortable with their own truths, declaring his difference to them. He even points the finger at other emerging church members, who are too quick to make claims about what is right and wrong.

All my life, I've been trying my hardest just to fit in with the people around me. Since I've been a church-goer for most of my 25 years - at first by default, then later by choice - a lot of my time has been spent trying to fit in with my co-religionists. It's not easy.

When I was younger, I felt a nagging sense that I wasn't doing things right. I didn't act the right way, or feel or think the things that I was supposed to.
[...]

Over the years, I've tried a few things. First off, I tried to know as much as the biggest Christian intellectuals. I bought shelf-loads of books and immersed myself in a rational, defensible belief-system. Only problem was, there were things I couldn't grasp and none of it seemed to make any difference.[...]

¹¹ The Rev (2006). Comment to "The Carson Conversation IV". Posted 10 September 2006 in Hamo, *backyard missionary*.

I've even tried the charismatic thing. Worshipping a certain way. Having the right experiences and gifts. Getting all excited about things. But I feel like a fake - like I'm manufacturing something that others have naturally.

I'm not even that good at being an "emerging" Christian. I'm too uptight about somethings and too flexible on others. I'm not burning with compassion for the poor or excitement for new ministries. Most of the people in the "conversation" sound like wankers and I've got little time for that.

Actually, I'm just tired.

So guys - it's over. No more faking. You win. I can't compete with your spiritual depth, with your passion, with your awesome relationship with God.

I've just got a half-arsed faith the size of a very small mustard seed and a lot of the time I can't even remember where I left it. (Dave, 22 August 2006)¹²

5.1.2 Scripture

There are over sixty posts in the studied blogs that contain references to texts found in the Bible, from debates about the place of the Bible in theological inquiry to jokes about "Bible-believing Christian" rhetoric. Bloggers in the sample generally agree on a historical-reductionist approach to biblical interpretation. They believe authors of biblical text wrote to an audience in a specific cultural place and time, with particular political worldviews. Meanings in Scripture should be understood, according to these bloggers, as informed by our knowledge of the political context in which it was written. This is well summarised in a post by Chris.

¹² Dave (2006). "In which I finally give up." *Aropax(R) Nation*. Posted 22 August 2006.

Our faith is set in history and therefore we need to know: when a book is written; what time was the book set; what genre the book was and what does this mean; who it was written by; to whom was it written; what was happening in history when the book was written (who is in power, what was the state of God's people at the time); what was happening in history at the time the book was set (who is in power, what was the state of God's people at the time) (Chris, 5 August 2006)¹³

This historical-reductionist approach is based on the principle that biblical text has a temporal meaning. Bloggers wish to read Scripture in the context of a past relationship between story-tellers and their audiences.

too many of us have grown up with the Bible as a list of rules and regulations some have even called it Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth, which suggests a focus on the rules and the kingdom to come perhaps if more of us saw the Bible as narrative, we'd more fully enter the relational experience of the kingdom among us and in us here and now (Kel, 7 July 2006)¹⁴

Blogs are, for the authors, a place to question certain interpretations of Biblical texts, as well as interpretive methods.

I have a confession to make.

I'm not sure if the Bible has one way of being interpreted.

You know what I mean? You get these people who say we need to look for

¹³ Chris (2006). "Isaiah Wide Shut." *A churchless faith*. Posted 5 August 2006.

¹⁴ Kel (2006). Comment in "I'm not a heretic..But...". Posted 7 July 2006 in Garth, *EmergingBlurb*.

the meaning of a passage and understand it in the original context.

But I get confused because if we're all meant to read the same interpretation why do we end up having different views and getting into arguments about the meaning of John 4 [...]?

I'm studying Ecclesiastes at the moment and one commentator writes that because of the fragmentary nature of the book there are a wide divergence of opinions resulting from it.

I guess one of the mysteries of the Scriptures are that total meaning is beyond our grasp. (Gaz, 17 July 2006)¹⁵

Most bloggers are keen to promote that the present social and political contexts in which the Bible is now received is important for the building of a contemporary Scripture-based religious identity.

The thing that is ringing my bell at the moment though Tim is something that Wright wrote (pardon the pun) in "Paul: Fresh Perspectives" (I have just finished scanning the thing). We reckon that Paul is primarily (in his letters) contending with Judaism. The primary target of his polemic however is not conservative or radical Jews, it is the imperial cult. It is the empire that he is setting his sights on. So when we see words and phrases like "son of man", "salvation", "good news", "lord" and "saviour", they are not religious terms. They are phrases lifted straight from the imperial lexicon as it were. He contextualises these phrases and put's Jesus and *his* kingdom at the centre, effectivley hip and shouldering the promise of good news that the lord and saviour, Ceasar, offers.

¹⁵ Gaz (2006). A single meaning?" *Saintgaz strikes back*. Posted 17 July 2006.

So I'm thinking, who is our empire, what are the promises and what is our idolatry? (Stephen Said, 26 July 2006)¹⁶

In conversations found in three sites, five bloggers in the sample make explicit their opposition to literalist interpretations of Scripture. Chris uses humour and irony to argue the Bible cannot be read literally as a set of moral instructions:

Find an attractive prisoner of war, bring her home, shave her head, trim her nails, and give her new clothes. Then she's yours. (Deuteronomy 21:11-13)

Find a prostitute and marry her. Hosea (Hosea 1:1-3)

Find a man with seven daughters, and impress him by watering his flock.

Moses (Exodus 2:16-21)

Purchase a piece of property, and get a woman as part of the deal. Boaz

(Ruth 4:5-10)

Go to a party and hide. When the women come out to dance, grab one and carry her off to be your wife. Benjaminites (Judges 21:19-25) [...]

Don't be so picky. Make up for quality with quantity. Solomon (1 Kings 11:1-3)

A wife?...NOT!!! Paul (1Corinthians 7:32-35)

No idea where I got this originally but it's not out of my head. (Chris, 8 May 2007)¹⁷

¹⁶ Stephen Said (2006). Comment in "Thinking out loud, please ignore for the time being...". Posted 26 July 2006 in Stephen Said, *neurotribe.net*.

¹⁷ Chris (2007). "15 Biblical Ways to Acquire a Wife." *A churchless faith*. Posted 8 May 2007.

Generally, bloggers are uncomfortable with the notion that Scripture is just a set of stories written in a foreign place and time. As Christians they want to acknowledge it as a source of faith. Despite historical-reductionism, bloggers in the sample express their desire to treat Scripture as more than narrative pieces bound by historical and political contexts. Scripture, for these writers, is a set of articles of faith, and they search for a way to talk about Scripture as more than simply stories, but not in a way that suggests they are the infallible, inerrant, direct words of God.

[...] the fact that the Bible is Inspired by God is pretty much just a faith thing. There are heaps of things that go toward proving its validity and accuracy, but the fact that Paul, Mark, John etc were Inspired by God in what they wrote is just a faith thing, no more. I believe it, but don't really think I can prove it. (Digger, 8 March 2007)¹⁸

The Bible, for them, is not a set of instructions for living as much as it is inspiration to live outside our understanding. This post by Gaz suggests a reconciliation of the tension between reductionism and faith.

Today's readings present one of the central challenges for me as to how I read the Bible. Is it consumed for comfort, for familiarity? Is it read for guidance down known paths? Or, as I think is the case here, is it read as a challenge to the intellect and to faith?"

I mostly agree with this statement. Though the Bible does contain much in the way of comfort there is a fair chunk that is weird, hostile, confusing and at times contradictory. Yet every word in the Scriptures was placed there by God. Why?

The only reason I can gather at the moment is that it places the Scriptures

¹⁸ Digger (2007). "On inspiration." *No diggity*. Posted 8 March 2007.

out of our realms of total understanding. Sure we know much of what the Bible means, but to be able to say definitively, "This is what God meant" makes us out to be God. And that is a fallacy.

We are not God, though he speaks to us through his words and other means, we cannot truly, completely know the mind of God. We are too limited in our ability.

The Bible is an disturbing collection of writings and should never be seen otherwise. These writings should cause us to live beyond our understanding and make the world a better place. (Gaz, 8 March 2007)¹⁹

Among these posts lies one instance of an exception. In his blog, *Missional diatribe*, Andrew claims the historical truth of the resurrection, treating the narratives in each Gospel as eye-witness accounts. In a posting of his Easter sermon, Andrew, in response to his own understanding of the Bible as the "subject of attack in our relativistic culture", claims:

1. You can't tame Jesus and put him in a box that suits your culture, worldview or theology. To know the risen Christ is to have your world, your priorities and your experience rocked off its perch.
2. Historically there is ample verification from four quite different sources that when combined tell us two things
 - a. That there is enough commonality in the differing accounts to believe them
 - b. That there is enough difference in the accounts to know that this is not some sort of organised cover-up.
3. Jesus really did rise from the dead.

¹⁹ Gaz (2007). "untitled". *Saintgaz strikes back*. Posted 8 March 2007.

- a. Fulfilling OT prophecies
 - b. Overcoming the ultimate power that death had
 - c. Creating a pathway for those who believe to follow him and commence their own path to salvation and eternal life in the presence of God
4. This is the truth. Despite what any person who wants to publish myths that sell to people with itching ears, this is what was recorded by the eye witnesses of this event. (Andrew, 10 April 2007)²⁰

In sum, the blogs reveal a number of generally held ideas about the reading and interpreting of Christian Scripture. Most authors claim that historical-reductionism should give an insight into the deeper meanings embedded in Scripture by highlighting the cultural and political motivations of its human writers, but should not devalue the Bible to a mere anthology of historical narratives. Furthermore, as one blogger calls his readers to accept the story of the resurrection as a history-changing event, others would like to uncover the power of Scripture to inspire and transform its own readers. Writers in the sample recognise that Scripture is the primary source of Christian exploration into the mind of God, but can never be fully and finally understood.

5.1.3 Mission and evangelism

Another major theme addressed in the sample's blogs, and therefore seen as central to building an emerging church identity, is the range of ideas and practices around the nature of Christian mission and evangelism. "Being emerging church" is discussed not only in terms of ideas, about beliefs or scripture, but also about practices and the nature of relationships with other Christians and non-Christians. Blogs are a vehicle for participants in the sample to reflect on the practices of Christians in relation to those outside the church. They are also sites to retell personal experiences of meeting others in ministry, ask questions and share knowledge.

²⁰ Andrew (2007). "Resurrection Reflections." *Missional diatribe*. Posted 10 April 2007.

Generally these bloggers are suspicious of programs and activities that attempt to convert people to Christianity, or attract them to come to church. For a start, having everyone come to church will not necessarily make the world a better place. Also, the motives by which the programs are implemented are under scrutiny. Bloggers question the packaging of spiritual goods for consumption and edification (and profit) of the supplier. Matt, for example, quite succinctly shows his disdain for mission practices that aim merely to attract people to church, such as programs that aim to entertain audiences. In it he asserts that merely bringing people to church does not automatically make the world better.

Audiences do not change the world

Audiences do not start revolutions (Matt, 6 August 2006)²¹

Theological propositions that guide mission and evangelism are also questioned. For example, the “God-shaped hole” rationale assumes that people who have not “received the Gospel” are lacking in their lives and at a major disadvantage. This rationale claims that people “need” Christianity. Chris viewed by bloggers as arrogant and judgmental.

The whole gist of the presentation was very much like the "God Shaped Hole" talk that one of my youth group leaders used to do when I was young. The message was that like the famous toy (see below) he had a God shaped hole in his life and no matter how he tried to fill it with cars, work, sport or girl friends none of them would fit and he needed God to be complete. I realise this is how a lot of suburban people probably think so I might learn something about reaching out to people in my new suburb, but most of the non [Christian] people I've known are already aware of the God shaped hole

²¹ Matt (2006). "The Bum of Christ." *Eclectic itchings*. Posted 6 August 2006.

in their life and are trying to fill it with other spiritual things. (Chris, 2 September 2006)²²

Vawz notes the arrogance behind, and the harm potentially caused by, the rationale that non-Christian culture is essentially worse than Christian culture.

The article "Post Colonial Youth Ministry" also went on to say -

In words: The gospel preached to the school students "you are sinners, you are going to hell, you need to be saved and forgiven for your sins, and we will show you how"

In deeds: "We will remove you from your culture, take up the rest of your free time, introduce you to new friends because your old ones aren't good enough and spend the next few years indoctrinating you." (Vawz, 8 September 2006)²³

Bloggers believe there is not much good in going to church that people haven't found in other faith practices and religious sources. The converse is also true; history shows that church-goers have much to be held accountable for. Tim shows this in a small manifesto on his blog.

I don't want more Christians - I want more people around like Jesus.

Mission is not about getting more people to sign up to be in our club. It is about recognising the greatness of Jesus, seeking to be like him yourself and encouraging others to do the same. It's the about of the kingdom of God, about participating in the creation of that place where ultimately there will

²² Chris (2006). "10 Weeks of Alpha Coming Up." *A churchless faith*. Posted 2 September 2006.

²³ Vawz (2006). "Post Colonial Youth Ministry." *No guarantees*. Posted 8 September 2006.

be no more tears, pain, oppression, abuse, poverty, loneliness, despair, etc.

I don't want more Christians because lots of Christians I know aren't actually that involved or even interested in this kingdom, I want more people like Jesus. (Tim, 21 August 2006)²⁴

In response to these rationales, three bloggers have played with the term "apologetics".

Reflecting the view that their faith is on trial by wider society, they seek to learn from others how to right previous wrongs, search for common objectives, and strive for reconciliation. In three conversations in as many sites, bloggers have retold the experience of the Desert Fathers, recalling a historical period when, like this one, Christianity needed a defence. For these emerging church bloggers, the culture wars between Christendom and secularisation is over, and Christendom lost. Yet, honouring past apologists, they want to claim that the Gospel is a story worth telling, that has offered them healing and hope. These writers want to instruct their own readers on how speak to their others on matters of religion.

It seems that many Christians are really awkward around people who don't share their faith convictions. I've tried to reflect on why this is the case.

Some possibilities that come to mind are:

1. Many Christians live out their faith in a Christian "ghetto" and feel awkward around those who live on the other side of the tracks.

2. Many Christians are most comfortable in the land of black and white.

When someone goes into gray territory, they feel unsure what to do next other than to argue for the truth of black and white.

3. Many Christians feel they must answer every objection to Christianity immediately, rather than be sensitive to timing and where the relationship is

²⁴ Tim (2006). "i don't want more christians." *A foot in both places*. Posted 21 August 2006.

at.

As I question whether or not I'm being too critical, I'm quickly reminded of the common perceptions people have of Christians in perhaps the majority of places around the world. It's worth taking the time not only to think about what we believe and why, but how we communicate this. (John Smulo, 7 October 2006)²⁵

Like John Smulo, bloggers such as Matt, Philjohnson and Hamo seek dialogue with non-Christians where conversion to Christianity appears absent on the agenda. In September 2006, Hamo invited a reader to "take over" his blog by posting a series of articles on how his spiritual journey led him away from Christianity. The reader's posts were welcomed by Hamo who thanked him for sharing his story and helping him and other readers understand why people reject the faith.²⁶

For these people, Christian witness is seen as being most authentically expressed in service. This may involve offering resources to communities in need, caring for individuals who are marginalised in these communities. They wish to see themselves not as missionaries to the lost, but fellow travellers, who carry the same questions, and are willing to find answers in others. Christian mission is as much a quest for self-transformation, and renewal of the present-day church, than it is a call to reform larger society.

²⁵ John Smulo (2006). "30 Days of Atheism and Christianity." *SmuloSpace*. Posted 9 August 2006.

²⁶ Hamo (2006). Comment to "Grendel and God – Part I". Posted 27 September 2006 in Grendel, *Backyard missionary*.

i've been contemplating today how jesus didn't tell us to go and visit the prisoner to take him to them, but to find him in them... (Cheryl, 13 July 2006)²⁷

These statements about mission and evangelism cast a light on the nature of emerging church blogging, as sites not designed to rally the troops, or convert people to their way of thinking. Instead, these blogs host confessions that their experience of Christianity is not all they have wanted it to be, and that the world they know is not the same world their churches think it is. They call out for alternative methods of thinking and doing mission. Perhaps there is another paradox to be noted, that in the use of new technologies these bloggers seek a return to older, even ancient, conversations.

While it's possible to speak about the Kingdom of God in very 'religious' or 'spiritual' terms - it's often when we talk about it in everyday language in the natural rhythms of life that it has the most impact. (Darren Rowse, 17 July 2006)²⁸

Cheryl suggests that Christians may be informed from those outside the Church about how to do mission and evangelism properly.

i think i've always assumed that it's people in the church who have the sacred stories to tell. People come to church when they're "searching", and we show them (walk with them, point the way) to where they might find salvation (in its broadest, most encompassing terms).

²⁷ Cheryl (2006). Comment to "waiting". Posted 13 July 2006 in Cheryl, *[hold :: this space]*.

²⁸ Darren Rowse (2006). "Thinking About Ministry." *Living room >> A space for life*. Posted 17 July 2006.

no doubt that's true for many people ... but i also keep being told these amazing sacred stories of redemption, transformation and grace by people "in the world", who would never use the Christian story to make sense of them (in fact they're often preceded with the words "I'm an atheist, but..."). In conversation with a friend a few weeks ago, telling our stories to each other, he made the observation that for both of us our stories of transformation and conversion happened outside the church. [...] How much of our language (even the best language) and how much of our insistence on the Christian story being the way the story of salvation needs to be told, stops people from recognising its unfolding in their lives? What if we began curating public 'sacred' spaces that assume people already have a story to tell - of longing or fulfilment, of agony or transformation... and that it can be told right where they are... that you don't have to come to church to find it or tell it? (Cheryl, 23 October 2006)²⁹

5.1.4 Church structure and authority

Most blogs examined in this study are authored by members of churches in mainstream Protestant denominations, as will be shown later in this chapter. Some are clergy and others are lay members who are working professionally for synods, dioceses and congregations. Bloggers generally identify with their denominations, to the extent that, if the emerging church were in any way seen as a separate entity, they would not want to belong to it. For them, the emerging church conversation is a context for considering change in their own church's life, rather than an alternative to their church. Being critical of a denomination to which one belongs is exemplified in the following post by Fernando. Of significance here is the recognition that emerging church

²⁹ Cheryl (2006). "wondering aloud." [*hold :: this space*]. Posted 23 October 2006.

bloggers, like Fernando, do not wish to establish a new denomination, but rather keep a conversation running about change within all denominations.

But maybe, those of us proclaiming new ways of expressing our faith, new ways of engaging with our world could pause a little more often to count the cost for those who are struggling to adapt. It's all too easy, when we hear the accusations from those who do not understand our project, to miss the pain in their voices. Globalisation, contingency, postmodernism, multiculturalism - these have never not been a part of my life and I've chosen them as much as they've chosen me. But for many, these are now being forced upon them, not by choice and there is a fight to adapt.

Perhaps instead of merrily announcing the imminent demise of the institutional church, celebrating the death of that culture, we should instead be asking ourselves how we are "good news," or "gospel" to those who are still God's people within those structures? (Fernando, 30 April 2007)³⁰

Yet they see their churches "stuck in Christendom". A frequent claim written in these blogs is that the divisions created in institutions between ordained and lay, and sacred and secular culture, are viewed as false by the world outside the church. Kel, for example, finds it arrogant that people within the Church place labels on the spiritual practices of others, or decide what others should or should not do to cultivate faithful living and relationships.

is it just me, or do these two comments from the article just reek of arrogance?

"At the 2004 Anglican general assembly, Sydney Archbishop Peter Jensen

³⁰ Fernando (2007). "Being A Missional Gospel For the Institutional Church." *Fernando's desk*. 30 April 2007.

spoke about reaching niche groups reluctant to go to church. "There's a group of lawyers who meet every Tuesday evening in a Sydney cafe for Bible study," he said. "They don't know they're Anglicans yet — we'll tell them when the time comes."

Like - hello - does it matter if they're Anglicans? Isn't it just great that they're meeting and studying? Why does everyone have to "own" people and take great joy in parading their "success stories".

and how about this . . . "Researcher Ruth Powell says . . . "We are finding other ways of gathering and exploring faith together, and they must be given permission for that. They must be given freedom to fail, to say 'that didn't work'."

great - let's give "them" freedom to fail - cos after all, what "we're" doing is so obviously successful!?!?!? (Kel, 10 April 2007)³¹

As people with leadership roles in their local context, many have much to say about the nature of leadership within the church. Conversations about leadership appear in nine sites. Among them is the regret that clergy often are called to represent the entire ministry of their congregations, and as such have to live up to difficult expectations. They are suspicious of the books and conferences that are advertised in clergy circles, promoting answers to "successful" ministry. They refuse the notion that one's ministry strategy will work for every pastor, and they are critical of the criteria on which such success is measured.

No, I am not renewing [my subscription to the journal, *Leadership*] because it is so... perfect. Everyone who writes in it seems to be able to reduce

³¹ Kel (2007). Comment to "The Church has left the building". Posted 10 April 2007 in Garth, *emergingBlurb*.

ministry to 5 easy steps or is a pastor of a 10,000 member church. And they all look so slick. I have started to find the journal oppressive. Stifling. Because for me following Jesus is not about being the CEO of an organisation but being the leader and pastor of a community of people who are trying to follow, worship and serve Christ and that often doesn't look successful or simple. And I actually have found that that last thing that a lot of my church's business people want on a Sunday is a CEO in the pulpit, let alone the others who aren't in business. They want the Bible opened and the whole service to help them get closer to God. And they want to be challenged to serve in the world.

So good bye Leadership Journal. I'll miss the comics. (Andrew, 26 July 2006)³²

Most evident in posts and conversations in the study is a critique of the so-called mega-church model of Christian community. While bloggers do not dismiss Protestant Evangelicalism outright, they see the mega-church model of ministry as contrary to the Gospel. Under particular blogger attack by bloggers fall Hillsong in Sydney and Riverview Church in Perth. Bloggers in the sample claim that they are not churches, but rather businesses that promote spiritual goods and services for money, and treat their congregants as consumers rather than participants. Lionfish exposes the practices of Hillsong against his own beliefs about both tithing and treating people within one's own faith community.

"1My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. 2Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. 3If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a

³² Andrew (2006). "Cancel my Subscription." *Missional diatribe*. Posted 26 July 2006.

good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” 4have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?”

How does this reconcile with the Kingdom builders programmes in some big Churches...?

If you donate over \$5000 to the tax-deductible building fund you can become part of a special club of ‘veryimportantbigpeople’ in the Church and have access to special priveledges like exclusive breakfasts with the Senior Pastor. You can also ‘network’ with and be noticed by the other ‘veryimporatntbigpeople’ in the Kingdom builders programme...

Plainly, St Paul in this letter to the Hebrews descrbes this type of thinking as ‘Evil’.

Can these programmes (as ‘pragmatic’ as they are) be reconciled to Christianity?

I think not. (Lionfish, 10 March 2007)³³

Here Lionfish aims to make a stance about what the emerging church must not be like, and establishes a point of difference between contemporary models of church and the new emerging model. Andrew makes a similar point when quoting the work of Eugene Peterson.

[...] It is bitterly disappointing to enter a room full of people whom you have every reason to expect share the quest and commitments of pastoral work and find within ten minutes that they most definitely do not. They talk of images and statistics. They drop names. They discuss influence and status.

³³ Lionfish (2007). Comment to "NT for Lent 15 - James 2". Posted 10 March 2007 in Dan, *Signposts*.

Matters of God and the soul and Scripture are not grist for their mills.

The pastors of America have metamorphosed into a company of shopkeepers, and the shops they keep are churches. They are preoccupied with shopkeeper's concerns—how to keep the customers happy, how to lure customers away from competitors down the street, how to package the goods so that the customers will lay out more money. [...]" (Andrew, 24 August 2006)³⁴

Every mega-church Christian will mindlessly assert 'my Pastor is a really good guy' and would never 'rip us off'. Then why are the financilas for Churches like hillsong and Riverview NOT made available upon request...? (Lionfish, 5 March 2007)³⁵

Not all bloggers in the sample are so critical of Hillsong and Riverview. One defends Hillsong against the critics that she connects with in the blogosphere, as shown below. Another shows some ambivalence.

Many people in the "emerging church" arena in Australia and in the "evangelical" arena in Sydney spend plenty of their time and energy bagging, slagging and snobbing Hillsong Church. I pose the question is this critising warranted? [...]

My Mercy t-shirt

The first Hillsong t-shirt I owned has butterflies on it and the word mercy written across the side. It is to support the social justice and transformation

³⁴ Andrew (2006). "Working the Angles." *Missional diatribe*. Posted 24 August 2006.

³⁵ Lionfish (2007). "Houses of The Holy." *Signposts*. Posted 5 March 2007.

outreaches of Hillsong church.

Many people overlook the massive amount of social justice and transformation work Hillsong is involved in. They take advantage of their size and income, devoting a massive proportion of it to work in the community, with the broken and needy.

As the butterflies symbolise, they believe in the power of God to recreate broken and hurting people into who God created them to be. And as the word mercy indicates, nothing is expected or sought by Hillsong in these acts of compassion, they are just responding to the heart of God.

Question: For those of you who bag Hillsong, what is the social justice and transformation work in your church or community like?

My daughter, warrior, princess t-shirt

Despite the sword on the front, which I know Matt can't get over, this t-shirt supports the Colour Your World conference and associated women's ministries of Hillsong Church. It is based on Holly Wagner's book *God Chicks*. If you have been to a Colour conference, you will get this, but for the rest of you...

The Hillsong female pastors have a passion for empowering women, desiring them to be all God created them to be. And for many women this is vital. I can attest to this myself. Many women (and men I know) struggle with insecurities, conformity, roles dictated by men, singleness, marriage and motherhood. [...]

Question: How is your church empowering, supporting and treating women?

Although I would probably not myself regularly attend Hillsong Church. I do visit and I support their work. I am also proud of the way they handle wrongdoing in the church. Ps. Brian had to sack his own dad, the founder of

the church, over sexual misconduct, and he sacked him without scandle.

How does your church handle misconduct?

Yes, I know that every church has its faults. They are all made of humans!

But instead of focusing on these faults, how about we focus on the good in churches, celebrate these, and learn from them! (Jen, 6 March 2007)³⁶

So, while some bloggers establish a point of difference with some models of church structures, as a way of building an emerging church position, others call for care in naming particular instances of such models, such as Hillsong. Yet an enduring theme found in blogs is the search for a “third option”, where traditional churches and mega-churches fail to connect Gospel with community and culture. In doing so, bloggers see their sites as spaces for refuge from these places, encouraging readers to share their stories of exclusion and promoting conversations of possible alternatives. From these conversations emerges a picture of the “ideal” organisation of Christians, where all members are active in decision-making and action in mission, according to their abilities, and where leaders are called to be “on the margins” of the community: equipping lay members in their own work, and exploring opportunities for new ministry projects and practices. This comes out in the following.

There seems to be a lot of discussion about the qualities of leaders. But this conversation seems to be overly theoretical. What is it that leaders, and Christian leaders in particular, actually do? Here are some of my thoughts.

1. Leaders follow Jesus.
2. Leaders serve people.
3. Leaders promote unity.
4. Leaders practice self-awareness.

³⁶ Jen (2007). “I have two Hillsong t-shirts.” *Jen’s musings*. Posted 6 March 2007.

5. Leaders are their own harshest critics.
6. Leaders seriously evaluate the criticism they receive, but they don't necessarily agree with it. [...] (John Smulo, 15 August 2006)³⁷

These bloggers realise that wealth and social power and commodities distributed among people in church communities and institutions. Emerging church bloggers call for a redistribution that flows from leaders to lay people.

The kind of charismatic, intuitive leadership (using the primary dictionary definition) which has shaped and formed both Ikon and Kubik is something my own denomination is very suspicious of. I wonder if the saving grace of leadership within Ikon and Kubik is that there is some kind of leadership collective, which holds the charismatic leadership in balance (it's different to accountability - or maybe it's more than accountability - it's a mutuality, a holding in tension. There's something about finding freedom because you are held within a group, not of being set free by a group).

The Uniting Church understands leadership very differently to this. Our prevailing model of leadership formation is for a 'modern', linear form of leadership. Our experimentation with leadership formation, for the last few years, has been to increase the capacity of leadership to be able to work within complexity - to create leadership that's light on its feet, reflexive (very much based on Senge, Argyris & Schon, Beckett, etc.). I wonder how we extend that latter to include or reclaim (redeem?) charismatic leadership. Part of that conversation needs to involve a reinterpretation of the role of

³⁷ John Smulo (2006). "What Leaders Do." *SmuloSpace*. Posted 15 August 2006.

ministers as leaders... and an 'imagining' of how leaders - who aren't the minister - can emerge within a congregation.(Cheryl, 29 September 2006)³⁸

5.1.5 Social commentary

Bloggers' opinions about politics, government, the environment, relationships between men and women, and other social issues, often carry, or are born from, religious sentiments, and understandings of God's relationship with humans and the rest of the planet. Thus posts and comments that carry social commentary are useful in helping create a picture of bloggers' religious identities.

Bloggers in the sample are generally unified in their stance on a number of social and moral issues they perceive in the world around them. The involvement of Australia and her allies in wars in the Middle East generate by far the most posts and comments in the periods studied. Followed closely are posts and comments on environmental issues, ranging from promotion of environmental actions to critique of the Australian government's current environmental policies. Many discussions focus on the distribution of wealth, both nationally and globally (39 posts and comments across sixteen sites). Reconciliation with Australia's indigenous people (five posts across five sites), the government's treatment of refugees (ten posts in seven sites), international human rights (six posts over six sites), the treatment of prisoners in detention and after release (fourteen posts and comments across six sites), race relations (five posts in five blogs), and the sexualisation of young people in television (sixteen posts and comments over nine sites) were also popular topics. Blog posts studied reflected a widely held view that Christians should not take a neutral stance on these issues, but respond to God's call to seek out the poor and oppressed,

³⁸ Cheryl (2006). "complexity, freedom, leadership and coffee." [*hold :: this space*]. Posted 29 September 2006.

treat all people as neighbours, and consider themselves as accountable to God in their stewardship of the planet's resources. This is seen in the following examples.

I can't believe the devastation we allow to happen in our world!?! Only twelve or so years after the horrendous genocide in Rwanda, history is repeating. Genocide is now happening in Sudan and the Congo, and on a small scale in Zimbabwe and the international community is silent again. This has been going on for months, if not years, and I am embarrassed that I have only found out about it this week. Embarrassed because our national media hasn't taken it up as an issue. Embarrassed because our churches are not "speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves". Embarrassed that our governments are keeping their attentions focused on our own national interests.

Please join me in writing to or visiting our local federal politicians: fervently petitioning them to move our governments to put pressure on these countries that are allowing genocide within their borders.

When we are silent, our hands are also stained with the blood of the innocent. (Jen, 20 September 2006)³⁹

In the periods studied, the issues of abortion and homosexuality were barely mentioned. In two instances, the position that abortion and homosexuality should be summarily opposed was questioned. In these cases the bloggers rejected the moral campaigns of the so-called religious right against these issues, contending that global issues of justice, peace and care for the environment are greater and more urgent. An example of how emerging church bloggers approach these issues is given here.

³⁹ Jen (2006). "History does not need to repeat itself!" *Jen's musings*. Posted 20 September 2006.

The church, and christians in general, are on the whole good at compassionate action for people who haven't had a hand in their own problems. We give money for food to starving African children, and we are willing to dedicate time and money to helping tsunami victims, or hurricane survivors.

What we're not good at is showing compassion for people who have had a hand in their own demise. We alienate pregnant teenagers who are facing abortions. We ignore the drug-dependent. Somewhere deep down, we believe that we couldn't be in that situation. That we're above these people. That it's their own fault.

I just wish that I wasn't speaking about my own feelings. Help me God.

(Geoff, 22 September 2006)⁴⁰

Geoff's post exemplifies what may be a link between bloggers' attitude towards moral opinions and the relationship between the Church and the wider world, in that Christians have much to learn about living in today's society from people outside the Church.

5.1.6 Faith practices

A common focus in many posts and discussions in the blogs was on corporate and personal faith practices. These included the presentation of liturgies and prayers written by bloggers, journaling of preparations for community worship services, private prayer regimens, and discussions on traditional and contemporary worship styles as practised in churches. A number of perspectives were identified in this focus. One was a desire to reclaim and renovate practices and symbolic environments that appear lost in recent Protestant history. A post from Chris illustrates this.

⁴⁰ Geoff (2006). "A quick thought on compassion." *TheGeoffRe(y)port*. Posted 22 September 2006.

After my recent monastery trip I've been inspired once again to come up with some kind of spiritual time table. This is something that I have talked about before on a bigger scale and have tried on a smaller scale but never with much success. I was hoping Christine Sine's book *Sacred rhythms* would help but I found it a little too much "Why having rhythms in your life is a good thing" and not enough "here's how you do it".

My initial idea is to start with the following...

1. Morning Prayer: Around breakfast I'll pray for the following...

Monday: Creation, Tuesday: The World, Wednesday: My Country / Community, Thursday: My Friends, Friday: My Family, Saturday: My Wife, Sunday: Me

2. Listen to the Bible in the car on the way to work (half hour each day)

3. Read Richard Rohr's reflection every weekday afternoon

4. Every Second Sunday go to church, Every other Sunday do a church at home thing. (Chris, 30 July 2006)⁴¹

Eddie offers another example.

This is the first time I've ever really engaged with Lent... Having been previously in a range of what you might call 'contemporary' churches, they tended to ignore the old church calendar and just end up suddenly celebrating Easter Sunday (as they also tended to want to ignore Thursday and Friday and just get happy on Sunday....)

But now we're in a church which is pretty interesting, they've got a good focus on Lent. Up the front of the church there is what you might call an

⁴¹ Chris (2006). "Getting into a Rhythm." *A churchless faith*. Posted 30 July 2006.

evolving artwork which the kids are adding to every week as Lent approaches. A nice touch...

And just to help get myself in the spirit, I decided to do the 'lenten thing' and give up something for the 40 days leading up to Easter. Working out what that would be was tricky... I can't really fast too easily as I have a family to cook for. And things like alcohol I don't have particularly often so it didn't feel like much of a sacrifice. But then one night over dinner while chatting about that my Mrs suggested that coffee might be the sacrifice for me!
(Eddie, 14 March 2007)⁴²

Of interest to bloggers were private devotional and meditational practices, including contemplative prayer and *lectio divina*. In the sample, five bloggers talk of their desire to inject into their daily lives a sense of the monastic, to engage in practices that bring the sacred into ordinary living. One blogger speaks favourably of rituals borrowed from other faiths and new religious movements.

Have you ever thought of Tai Chi as a spiritual discipline?

[...]When I first dived into the New Age movement, back in the late 80s, most of my friends considered the link between Tai Chi and spirituality to be immediately obvious. It was exotic and eastern. New Agers were the only white people doing it. QED. But it seems that, as with the mainstreaming of so many things, fewer people stop to consider its spiritual dimensions today. As with yoga, because people are no longer alarmed, they're no longer alert. Yet the links are there for those with the eyes to see. The very name itself evokes Taoist spirituality. [...]

⁴² Eddie (2007). "a decaffeinated lent..." *breathing space*... Posted 14 March 2007.

It needs to be noted that eastern religions do not often respect the sacred-secular and mind-body dichotomies that plague religion, as most people know it, in the west. There is no intrinsic incompatibility between martial arts and meditation practice. (Matt, 8 July 2006)⁴³

In their conversations about corporate worship, six bloggers show they do not enjoy the light and sound shows of many contemporary Sunday services. Their writing showed a resistance to the directive styles of music lyrics and liturgies that either conform to strict theological principles or are filled with redundant words (especially "I just really want to..." type prayers).

The linguistic-semantic peculiarities of evangelicals, charismatics, and Pentecostals is often reflected in the vocabulary used in prayer.

I have often sat in prayer groups and agonised as bad grammar and redundant words are used. One of the linguistic markers that identifies who is "in" and who is "out" in prayer is the obsessive use of the word "just". "Just be with us Lord", "Just to come closer to you", "we just thank you" etc ad nauseam.

The word "just" is normally used as an adverb or as an adjective. In prayers the word carries no extra value, weight or meaning -- one is not increased in piety, wisdom or spiritual insight by frequently using the word. So I am all for a moratorium on the word in prayers when the sentences do not require its use as an adverb or adjective.

In a similar vein Tony Jones has touched on the problem of "just" in prayers and has a hint or two about good prayers reflecting good theology. That little insight is consistent with good hymns-songs and good theology, and with

⁴³ Matt (2006). "Moving Meditations." *Eclectic itchings*. Posted 8 July 2006.

good missions and good theology, and good theology and good praxis. The opposite is also the case: bad theology goes with bad prayers, bad theology and lousy hymns-songs, bad theology and bad missions, and bad theology and bad praxis. (Philjohnson, 28 March 2007)⁴⁴

They enjoy the use of art and popular music to create audio-visual environments that gently guide people through an experience of the sacred. The poems, prayers and liturgies offered use themes and motifs borrowed from urban living to connect love, pain, joy and loss with God's story of hope and renewal.

I think that's possibly one of the strongest things about "Alt-Worship" is the assumption that people bring with them their own stories of the sacred, their own experiences and allows them the space to reflect and/or share them with each other. one of my favourite things to do in installation worship is to create spaces where stories can be collected, added to, shared. I'm reminded of the ETERNITY display in the National Museum where they've got a number of installations dedicated to the human spirit of mystery, faith, fear, joy, despair, each installation sharing the stories of 4 or 5 Australians who's stories fit with that theme. At the end of the space are two computers with cameras connected and the invitation for whomever attends to share their story and become a part of the living display there. It's actually interesting that when I hear that someone's gone to the national art gallery I assume they've touched the sacred somehow, or it's touched

⁴⁴ Philjohnson (2007). "Eliminate "Just" from Prayer." *circle of pneuma*. Posted 28 March 2007.

them and I ask about their experience, but if someone says they've gone to church I don't automatically assume the same. (Darren, 24 October 2006)⁴⁵

[...] our church search came to an end as we decided that one of those we had visited recently really did work for us, and we were happy to give it a bit of a go....

I'm also personally thrilled by their involvement in the creative arts, with the attached art gallery which is quite intensively used... It's a great thing to enter and exit church each week through a gallery, and reflect on the art therein, and even hear the reflections talk about the art that is up at that time...

It's also great to see a church that is also pragmatic in its worship and preaching - It's been a great learning curve for me into a whole heap of lona and locally produced music, which not only sounds very different to much contemporary worship, but also has such real, everyday language in them... and the preaching also reflects the everyday. Good stuff... (Eddie, 10 August 2006)⁴⁶

In the conversations about the purpose and nature of Christian worship, these emerging church bloggers want to dissolve the distinctions made between religious and secular text, and sacred and profane spaces. They do this by suggesting the use of popular images, music and other texts in otherwise traditional services, and through the use of art installations, promote the creation and mediation of experiences of the sacred in other public spaces. In their personal lives, they

⁴⁵ Darren (2006). Comment to "wondering aloud". Posted 24 October 2006 in Cheryl, [*hold :: this space*].

⁴⁶ Eddie (2006). "And the winner is..." *breathing space*... Posted 10 August 2006.

show a desire to break away from the "Sunday Christian" lifestyle by bringing the religious into everyday living.

As I mentioned in my previous post on third places, one of the core features of post-modernity is a breakdown of the dichotomy between sacred and secular. This breakdown is not something that Emerging Churches are introducing to the culture, it is something that defines the culture before they have even entered it. Something that they should be finding is already there.

To put it bluntly, there is no such thing as virginal secular space within post-modernity. To the extent the context is purely secular it is not post-modern. To the extent that it is post-modern it is not purely secular. We may find secularized SACRED spaces and sacrilized SECULAR spaces but either way we should be discovering that the dichotomy has already been undermined. If we are not finding it already there, and are under the impression that it is we who are doing the deconstruction, I tend to think that says more about a lack of discernment than anything too profound about our efforts. (Matt, 15 October 2006)⁴⁷

In some cases, blogging itself is considered part of this spiritual regimen. Three bloggers present posts for the sole purpose for encouraging others to contemplate and share stories, or to meditate on the words or pictures on screen and tell of their experience of doing so. Two others treat the blogosphere as a confessional space, telling stories of their daily rights and wrongs and requesting absolution and support from their readers. In instances over seven sites, bloggers ask

⁴⁷ Matt (2006). "Transforming Secular Space?" *Eclectic itchings*. Posted 15 October 2006.

readers to pray with them on private or public issues, and offer a prayer to be read by their audience, or a picture to meditate on.

5.1.7 Discursive deliberations

Reading blog posts and comments this researcher has seen that:

1. As far as posts in the sample could illustrate, two doctrines are promoted as fundamental to emerging church theology: that God is three-in-one; and that knowing the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus is necessary for knowing God.
2. Bloggers tend to critique interpretations of Scripture and establishments of theological doctrines on the basis of knowledge of the social and political contexts in which they were composed. Furthermore, how Christians lived in the first century has much to teach bloggers about Christian life in the early twenty-first century.
3. There is a widely reflected positive attitude toward contemporary religious pluralism, and acceptance that Christianity is a choice among many other equally valid choices for all people. This is, for bloggers, a primary example of the similarities between the world of the first century and postmodern Western society.
4. Questions of economic and social justice, care for the planet and empowering people to participate in social institutions are generally more important to bloggers than questions of sexual orientation, sexual practice in and out of marriage and abortion, and therefore bloggers criticise “right-wing” constructions of Christian morality and justice.
5. Bloggers tend to make explicit a strong concern for the distribution of both economic wealth and social power between clergy and laity in Australian Christian churches. In general posts show a belief that wealth and power should flow from the former group to the latter and judge Christian institutions when they see the reverse occurring.

From this reading a number of discursive tensions may be identified. By this, the researcher means, learning from the work of Bucholtz and Hall (2005), that participants in blogging

conversations consider the contextual meaning of labels and symbols against ideas and values, to promote the emergence of a way of identifying themselves as emerging church Christians. Three such tensions noted by this researcher may be introduced in two sets of terms: orthodoxy and heresy; and doubt and authenticity.

In recognition that Christianity exists alongside alternative religions, faith practices and philosophies in Australian public life, bloggers seek to affirm Christian ideals that serve both as a point of reference against other religions and as a value that informs good relationships with people of other faiths (and no faith). Orthodoxy is introduced by these bloggers as a value upheld by the emerging church, which seeks to establish or reassert religious doctrines that are in line with the church's historical, political and ideological origins, and based on a similarly sound interpretation of Scripture. Heresy is not the opposite of orthodoxy, but a recognition that this mode of theological inquiry is not always welcome by present institutional offices. For bloggers, the opposite of orthodoxy is heterodoxy, where one's religious values seem to be a collection of self-serving ideals based on a random collection of Bible verses. Orthodox Christianity is not a claim that there is one true faith. Rather, it guides how bloggers relate to them.

The second question I would ask was, "When God thinks of a witch, what do you think comes to mind?" What was a loud and boisterous conversation at this stage always transitioned to an atmosphere where you could hear a pin drop. I got the impression that either they had just answered what they think God thinks of, or they had never thought of that question.

I would always give them a biblical answer: "When God thinks of a witch, he thinks of someone that he loves. When God thinks of a witch, he thinks of someone made in his image. When God thinks of a witch, he thinks of someone created to have a relationship with him. When God thinks of a witch, he thinks of someone that Jesus died on the cross for. When God

thinks of a witch, he thinks of someone that you should respectfully share your faith with." (John Smulo, 7 October 2007)⁴⁸

As orthodoxy and heresy are constructed as partners, so doubt and authenticity should be read in these emerging church blogs. These bloggers do not reject doctrine altogether, but want to remind themselves of their fallibility.

Not everyone is down on propositional truth in fact I don't think I know too many EC Aussies who would dismiss propositional truth at all. A more humble approach to scripture is not a denial of its truth, simply a recognition that we do not know completely. Please frame this correctly as you misrepresent many of us in this assertion. (Hamo, 20 July 2006)⁴⁹

If past and present church doctrines need revision, then living an "authentic" Christian life requires letting go of little truths. For these bloggers, authentic Christianity is the search for a truth greater than themselves and their own worldview, and this path is hindered by the unconditional defence of "little truths" such as doctrines of hell, heaven, etc. Bloggers consider doubt as a Christian value, as a condition of humanity, and a symptom of a flawed religious system. Honouring doubt is a necessary component of living authentically as a Christian, for these bloggers.

Truth is not something we subjectively invent with our tools... it is a reality we encounter.

Truth is bigger than our arguments and rational conditions for we did not

⁴⁸ John Smulo (2007). "God and Wicca." *SmuloSpace*. Posted 7 October 2007.

⁴⁹ Hamo (2006). "Guidelines for Critiquing the Emerging Church." *Backyard missionary*. Posted 20 July 2006.

invent Truth or miracles, but merely tried to explain them. I sense too often that the answer is posed before the question has been asked with such things because our truths are relative to the biases of our individual conditions; ie we convince ourselves of what we want to believe. I don't won't to live that way anymore. I am happy to realise that I can't explain everything away and that the unexplainable happens.

"The future no longer belongs entirely to cold and calculating brains--those who know only "sequence," "literalness," and "analysis". It belongs, increasingly, to creativity, artistry, and empathy--metaphor, meaning, and emotion--pattern, synthesis, and the big picture." (Dr Thomas Hohstadt)

With regard to miracles, I feel that the authentic has been clouded over by the wishful thinkers, the presumptuous and the money grabbers. But the miraculous doesn't draw attention to itself, just as JC's water that was turned into wine went un-noticed in a back room. The miracle simply serves its purpose, not itself. (Garth, 5 July 2006)⁵⁰

2. We value genuine relationships which are caring, generous and empowering, and which show integrity and mutual accountability.

It has been said that conventional churches tend to measure the quantity of relationships, while the house churches measure the quality of relationships.

As a house church we have set out to measure our effectiveness by the capacity to foster authentic conversation in which we open ourselves to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. We don't expect to stay the same.

Although many of us have been influenced by our engagement with the

⁵⁰ Garth (2006). "Science, proofs and miracles." *emergingBlurb*. Posted 5 July 2006.

behavioural sciences, we ground our commitment to genuine relationships
in the person of Jesus. (Duncan, 25 September 2006)⁵¹

5.2 Posts and comments about the relationship between bloggers and their audiences

This section exposes bloggers' opinions and ideals about proper interaction in the blogosphere, as made known in posts and conversations online. Blogging etiquette, it will be shown, is informed in part by bloggers' own opinions of the Internet and blogosphere, and in part by their religious convictions. Topics outlined are: establishments of rules of interaction for bloggers and comments; responses to breaches; codes of engagement in debate; redundancies used in blogging posts and comments by bloggers; discursive devices used to establish care, trust, friendship and humour.

5.2.1 Rules of interaction

Bloggers' aim to prevent anti-social behaviour ("flaming") within conversations in comment threads by establishing ground rules. They may appear in posts where rules for interaction are listed explicitly, or on separate pages on their blog site, or they may appear in *ad hoc* fashion on posts and comments, following the identification of flaming. It is evident in the sample's data that bloggers tend not to start their online career with the establishment of such rules. Rather, bloggers often decide to establish them once a significant number of comments appear after posts, that involve some flaming behaviour, or after a blogger reads such behaviour on another's blog.

Just because the comment volume on here has increased recently, and also
because there's the occasional comment that makes me unhappy - I've

⁵¹ Duncan (2006). "Relational Church Doctrine." *Pacific Highlander*. Posted 25 September 2006.

added in a brand new comments policy. Have a quick look, and this means I won't feel guilty if I need to "edit" or just outright delete your comment. (Geoff, 16 February, 2007)⁵²

As Vawz asserts, bad language in itself does not constitute flaming, but language intended to label others based on disagreements (as, for example, not Christian, or immoral/amoral) are considered as such by bloggers, including Matt and Dan. Bloggers encourage difference of opinion if offered in the spirit of respect and dialogue, but see the forcing of one's opinions as "the only right choice" as flaming. This researcher declares that Dan's post was written shortly after, and in direct response to an interview conducted between the blogger and the researcher.

Is Damn a swear word? Crap? Poo? Wee? Urine? Bother? Gosh? Gaw? Jeez?

Oh? Arghh? Shit?

Maybe just score each one out of 10 please, 10 being nasty for a Christian 1 being like super Christian.

Then after scoring please give a morality score to the person who would really sit and decide all of the above...10 being super pharisee 1 being Jesus... (Vawz, 16 October 2006)⁵³

My basic rule is, as long as it's civil, it's allowable. I want to create a safe space for the discussion of new ideas and that means at times respectful disagreement will be part of the conversation. You don't have to agree with me. I don't have to agree with you. But the key word here is respect. That's

⁵² Geoff (2007). "New to TheGeoffRe(y)port – A Comments Policy." *TheGeoffre(y)port*. Posted 16 February 2007.

⁵³ Vawz (2006). Comment to "Everything Sucks". Posted 16 October 2006 in Vawz, *No guarantees*.

where the magic happens. I allow a certain amount of sarcasm, provided the sarcastic ones are prepared to take as good as they give, but hostility to others is not tolerated. I believe people of all religions are to be treated with respect, no matter how weird their beliefs may seem to you. For my Christian readers, who seem to be the majority, I merely ask you consider how weird resurrection could seem to others whom you find weird. (Matt, 29 March 2007)⁵⁴

The moment you call your opponents heretical or imply they are not Christians or don't believe in God you have lost all of my respect. If you have reached whatever age you have and have not comprehended that genuine people of faith have genuinely held positions of faith which are different, then you are either self-deluded or close-minded. Disagree with my opinions if you wish, but do not say that my opinion makes me non-Christian (Dan, 19 March 2007)⁵⁵

In addition to flaming, bloggers make explicit their dislike for anonymous comments. Bloggers in the sample enjoy being able to identify (even if it is a pseudonym) commenters across blog conversations, and recognise that attaching a name to a comment fosters the potential for ongoing dialogue. Conversely, anonymity is seen as a defence for flammers. For example, Matt sees the use of general usernames or the absence of a name as a licence to make hurtful comments without fear of response.

⁵⁴ Matt (2007). "Comment Policy." *Journeys in between*. Posted 29 March 2007.

⁵⁵ Dan (2007). "So you want to argue?" *Signposts*. Posted 19 March 2007.

I prefer people to be open about their identity, it makes for better conversation, but for those who are really nervous about self disclosure, you are free to use pseudonyms when you leave a comment and submitting your URL is optional. You don't have to come out of the closet if you don't feel comfortable. The only thing I won't tolerate is witch finder generals using masks to make hit and run accusations. That's against the spirit of things here. (Matt, 29 March 2007)⁵⁶

A couple of bloggers have encountered comments from people who appear to them less interested in the topic at hand than in promoting a certain point of view, unrelated to the discussion, or worse, in promoting a web site. Like "flaming", the slang for this behaviour is "spamming", and when it arises, bloggers assert their dislike, by establishing a rule in a post or submitting a comment response. Philjohnson provide examples, both in his own blog and in response to a comment on a friend's site.

I am afraid I do not understand the point of your comment in the context of this post about the Australian Federal Government's policies about citizenship. My post is clear that I do not share its preconceptions, and amidst my illustrations I am highlighting the shallowness and idiocy of the idea that an authentic Australian value means that its citizens frequent pubs. As I note that Muslims do not partake of alcohol this starkly contrasts with jingoistic outlook expressed in the Government's press release. The fact that the Pope made unpleasant or provocative comments about

⁵⁶ Matt (2007). "Comment Policy." *Journeys in between*. Posted 29 March 2007.

Islam has no relevance to the current topic. (Philjohnson, 15 September 2006)⁵⁷

Dear John

You seem to be very keen on dropping by various blogs and leaving many assertive statements concerning the teachings of your guru. You then conclude your remarks with hyper-links to articles that expound the teachings of your guru [...]

Are you genuinely interested in discussing the topics raised on this blog? Let me explain why I have posed this question.

[...] What you need to be aware of is that several other bloggers have been deleting your comments from their blogs. The reason for this is not so much about denying you an opportunity to comment or to censor you but that there does not seem to be any relevant interaction with the original posts. The topics on the blogs differ quite extensively from the links you provide, and so you do leave the negative impression that your actions and comments begin to verge on "religious spam". You may not intend this but it is the impression that you are generating. (Philjohnson, 10 August 2006)⁵⁸

Greg the explorer recognises that privacy is a right of both commenters and bloggers, and suggests that if people ask him to share personal information that has not been previously made available online, that they at least state why they would want to know.

⁵⁷ Philjohnson (2006). Comment to "'Australian Values' and Citizenship". Posted 15 September 2006 in Philjohnson, *circle of pneuma*.

⁵⁸ Philjohnson (2006). Comment to "Beyond The Culture Wars". Posted 10 August 2006 in Matt, *Eclectic itchings*.

Happy to talk this through with you [...] - but to engage in conversation I like things to be on an equal footing, so I have a quest for you first...why is that information important to you? I am happy to provide you with the answers you seek - but seeing as though it's my information...you gotta buy it by answering my question. (Greg the explorer, 2 October 2006)⁵⁹

The behaviour of those who comment on others' blogs has not been the sole focus of discussion on interaction in the blogosphere. During the sample period, two bloggers drew attention to the behaviour of those who post articles too, suggesting ways that bloggers in general can improve on their self-presentation. In the example below, Fernando lists ways in which a blogger's site can be more attractive to readers, and generate good relationships with audiences.

Generosity - I like blogs that share the love. Blogs that help out new blogs, that share media content (papers, music, images, video), with lots of links (not just in the blogroll, but also in the posts). Blogs with few active outgoing links seldom make it into my "blog premier league" and never manage to stay there if they do.

Hospitality - Good blogs welcome you. I'm put off by blogs with solid content but no space for comment (or blogs that treat commentators dismissively). Sometimes a blogger's response to comments says a lot more about them than their main-posts.

Creativity - Not just in content, but in presentation and language. You don't have to be Shakespeare, but you'll win me over if you show even a little flair.

Honesty - Want to tell me how perfect and above reproach your church, or

⁵⁹ Greg the explorer (2006). Comment to "What's your story?". Posted 2 October 2006 in Greg the explorer, *Exploring emerging embracing*.

group or strategy is? Good for you - but I won't buy it and I will probably tune out of your blog very soon.

Substantiality - To paraphrase Hugh McLeod, "give me content baby!" Say something and then explore that in some depth. I don't expect an essay everyday (and don't have that much time), but I appreciate that saying some things takes time.

Sustainability - Has the blog got legs? One thing I ask myself is, does this blog look like it could still keep my interest in a year or two? For me to "subscribe" to a blog, I have to feel like it will pay off, that means something in the content has to stand out, it means there has to be enough breadth, not just depth.

Non-Circularity - OK, I'm running out of words ending in -y! I get bored with parasitic blogs (just quoting other blogs and other news-sources), or blogs that go around and around the same topic. That's part of my beef with some emerging church blogs. Too many blogs commenting on other blogs comments on what some other blogger said about what someone said about some emerging church leader's response to another emerging church leader. (Fernando, 1 September 2006)⁶⁰

John Smulo expands on Fernando's "Hospitality" idea to consider how bloggers who start conversations with posted articles should stay engaged with those who comment, as one would do in a conversation among people in the "real world".

The possibility for interaction is one of the things I like most about blogging. Every blog at its best is a catalyst for community, interaction, and personal

⁶⁰ Fernando (2006). "The Blog Leagues." *Fernando's desk*. Posted 1 September 2006.

growth that results from humans rubbing shoulders with each other and refining their thoughts.

Imagine a conversation that went like this in a coffee shop with three friends:

Billy Blogger: Yesterday was Friday the 13th. I'm not a superstitious guy, but I'm interested to know how the day wound up shrouded in infamy. I'm curious if anyone else knows?

Jennifer Reader: Interesting question Billy. I've heard that it has something to do with some scary film, does that sound right?

Billy Blogger: Silence.

Tom Reader: Uh.....Did you know that fear of Friday the 13th is known as paraskavedekatriaphobia?

Billy Blogger: Silence.

In "real" life, Billy would be seen as a rude dude, don't you think? Why is this different in blogging? (John Smulo, 14 October 2006)⁶¹

5.2.2 Responses to breaches

Blogging software gives authors the power to "moderate" comments on their sites. This may involve requesting a blogger's approval of a comment before publication on the site, the capacity of bloggers to edit and delete others' comments, or requesting that readers register identification and contact details before being allowed to make comments. Of all blogs in the sample, only two have made use of this, third, registration option, to prevent flaming and spamming. One quickly deactivated the option after glitches prevented some usual commenters from joining in conversations.

⁶¹ John Smulo (2006). "I Heart Comments." *SmuloSpace*. Posted 14 October 2006.

In only three instances was evidence made known that bloggers had either deleted or refused to approve the comments of “flamers” in either a current post or in past conversations. For brevity, two examples are given here.

To the person who was previously banned - by the way, our one and only banned commenter despite significant pressure.

We see you have began commenting again. You are welcome to stay but you are on probation. A reading of the guidelines is important for your continuing presence here. (Phil, 1 February 2007)⁶²

Update: I just received a somewhat meanspirited (given the circumstances) comment pointing out that the image used in this post was originally available through European Graduate School site. Whilst that was not where I originally found the image (which is now resident in a number of locations), I’m more than happy to credit the EGS and thank them for making resources available online. However, I won’t approve anonymous comments, especially one’s that make false and cowardly accusations. (Fernando, 8 March 2007)⁶³

Nine other posts found in the sample make it apparent that bloggers would prefer not to exclude people from any conversation, and seek other ways of dealing with issues. The Rev shows his interest in learning more about one of his readers in the following example, though the reader’s comments are too offensive for The Rev to allow, so he suggests a private meeting.

⁶² Phil (2007). “to whom it may concern.” *Signposts*. Posted 1 February 2007.

⁶³ Fernando (2007). Comment to “Jean Baudrillard”. Posted 8 March 2007 in Fernando, *Fernando’s desk*.

Perhaps it would be better if we just talked in person, because your caustic way of demeaning me, and everyone else on this blog is not productive. If you cannot be civil I would rather you didn't post. (The Rev, 8 April 2007)⁶⁴

Matt addresses Philjohnson's problem with religious spamming appearing on Matt's blog (mentioned above) by offering a space for dialogue about the religious material promoted therein.

As John Kyneton seems determined to seed spangelism about cult leader Da Free John across the blogosphere I thought I'd be indulgent and create a legitimate space for discussion of Ja Free John and his teachings here.

This blog is after all about how Christian engage with other paths, so hopefully we can all learn from this. I do warn however John, that leaving links on other posts will not be considered legitimate from hereon in unless they are on topic. I am not a fan of monologues or propoganda and I ask you to respect that.

So firstly, John, I'd like to hear your story. What attracted you to Da Free John and his teachings? What do you find most appealing about his pathway? How do you see him in relation to Jesus? And how would you like to respond to Philip's challenges here about his cult tendencies and problems in his teachings?

Secondly, for my Christian readers, I would like to ask how many of you recognised John as a devotee of Da Free John, or indeed, know who Da Free John is? It's been my observation that many non-Christians are beginning to

⁶⁴ The Rev (2007). Comment to "A resurrection story (and my return from exile)". Posted 8 April 2007 in The Rev, *The rev*.

engage in the Emerging Church conversation. That's good! But are we all aware where they are coming from? How do you think we should respond? What do you see as potentially of value in Da Free John's teachings (see John's site here)? What would you critique? Do you see critique as having a legitimate in the Emerging Church conversation?

Finally, for my readers who are neither Christians nor Daists, what do you make of all this? (Matt, 10 August 2006)⁶⁵

Dan recognises in the blog that she co-owns the potential, given the usual length of conversations that follow her posts and the number of readers involved in them, of the group of readers to deal with anti-social behaviour, and thus opts to let this group deal with such issues itself.

I am willing to moderate some of these comments if asked, but I suspect they are the best argument against the views of the Ross1 et al. (Dan, 9 February 2007)⁶⁶

5.2.3 Dialogue and debate

Beyond flaming and spamming comments, bloggers in the sample have shown their welcome of criticism and disagreement by those who read their posts and care to comment. In the following example, The Rev endeavours to explain a previous statement that had caused concern to a reader.

Ellie,

please do not leave, that serves no purpose.

I may have phrased that incorrectly, and for that I am sorry. What I meant to

⁶⁵ Matt (2006). "So What's Da Story?" *Eclectic itchings*. Posted 10 August 2006.

⁶⁶ Dan (2007). Comment to "shall we sign?". Posted 9 February 2007 in Phil, *Signposts*.

say is that sometimes “I feel” like the other emerging church groups are saying the same things that we are saying, and their criticisms of us are not substantive, but rather, they are getting all the press but we are here too.

[...] (The Rev, 24 July 2006)⁶⁷

In a conversation where Greg the explorer accuses Hamo of “backing down” too easily over his criticism of a religious education project, Hamo praises Greg for his persistence on the issue, despite their ongoing debate. In this Hamo shows his reluctance to end the conversation, despite his belief an agreement between the two will not be reached. When reading this quote, please note that the term “bugger” in White Australian culture is often read as a term of endearment or friendship.

I’ve just got home and I’m smiling Greg :)

You’re a persistent bugger!

But I am not easily bullied :) I disagree with you that I have erred. I imagine I agree with you on the cost factor.

This is where I stand... (Hamo, 3 August 2006)⁶⁸

In many conversations where disagreements between blog authors and their commenting audience arise, bloggers recognise that their brand of religion and worldview may be fundamentally different from others and thus see that “agreeing to disagree” is often the most productive course of action.

⁶⁷ The Rev (2006). Comment to “Guidelines for Critiquing the Emerging Church”. Posted 24 July 2007 in Hamo, *Backyard missionary*.

⁶⁸ Hamo (2006). Comment to “The WCA Summit Part II – An Apology”. Posted 3 August 2006 in Hamo, *Backyard missionary*.

Hi fellas - making for a great discussion! [...]

Alex - I don't know if I have a choice as to where I sit!

You are an evangelical for better or worse and I guess I am EMC er for better or worse.

Are you a Sydney Anglican evangelical? I don't think so... Am I a liberal EMCer? Nope.

Such is the struggle with labels. I can't see a way out of it!

Yet during the sample periods two issues appeared in the blogosphere around which blog authors generally refused to engage in debate. The first is the labelling of people and groups as wrong, evil, immoral or not Christian. The second is the generalisation of those in the emerging church conversation when criticising the movement. Posts and comments by bloggers show that they consider both of these acts as "flaming", and therefore set the borders within which debates should be conducted in their sites. The first is exemplified in Tim's response to a reader's comment on two other bloggers. Matt writes for the latter, response to a reader's criticism of the emerging church.

Well I'm glad that you feel comfortable enough to say what you think [...].

Unfortunately you're wrong and now I'm going to say what I think.

If you have an issue with Phil and Dan then take it up with them. Your slanderous action is entirely unchristian, you should repent, ask them for forgiveness and seek to sort out whatever grief you have with them. (Tim, 16 March 2007)⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Tim (2007). Comment to "The pain and privilege of making yourself vulnerable". Posted 16 March 2007 in Tim, *A foot in both places*.

I appreciate your openness to revising the article. I acknowledge that the terms ‘emergent’ and ‘emerging church’ are indeed virtually synonymous in some quarters of the US, where the Village people are more dominant than elsewhere, and that Brian and friends aren’t doing any of us a favour by muddying the waters over nomenclature. I am really only asking a more global perspective on the global conversation and that the movement be understood in its diversity. (Matt, 1 August 2006)⁷⁰

Seeking comment, dialogue and debate from their readers, some bloggers regularly use statements and questions at the end of posts to invite comment from readers. Chris Logan, for instance, ends a post with the simple sentence, “Discuss.” As a teacher to students, Chris Logan’s places the sentence there in the hope that readers will offer some critical suggestions and not merely agree (Chris Logan, 13 August 2006)⁷¹. Other bloggers’ requests are not so concise. Jen, for example, seeks a carbon neutral lifestyle and looks to readers, not just for suggestions, but for others with whom to engage in the global warming debate.

**Some practical ways to be neutral, for churches, homes and businesses,
and David and I are attempting these are: [...]**

What some ways you can suggest? What are your thoughts on the Global Warming issue? (Jen, 8 March 2007)⁷²

⁷⁰ Matt (2006). Comment to “The Amusement Index”. Posted 1 August 2006 in Matt, *Eclectic itchings*.

⁷¹ Chris Logan (2006). “National Pride.” *Random thoughts by Chris*. Posted 13 August 2006.

⁷² Jen (2007). “When being “Neutral” is a good thing”. *Jen’s musings*. Posted 8 March 2007.

In the following example, Phil receives a readers' comment and believes it is worthy of its own post, and seeks comment from the community of readers.

Wayne poses an interesting question in one of the threads and I thought it worthy of its own thread: [...]

Watcha all think? (Phil, 17 March 2007)⁷³

Articles posted during the sample period show that bloggers endeavour to ensure they do not present themselves as an "expert" on any issue, to the effect that they would like to be seen as open to having their mind changed by, and learn from, readers who comment on their posts. Geoff, for instance, reaffirms his appreciation to a reader who considers himself too harsh in his criticism of one of Geoff's posts.

Don't be sorry at all [...] - you're helping me to think about this whole thing, and I'm appreciating the opportunity. It's certainly not personal at all: I'm really enjoying it. (Geoff, 14 February 2007)⁷⁴

Hamo seeks advice from his audience on how clergy should respond to changing ideas of marriage, claiming that he is far from comfortable with his own understanding with how to deal with such matters:

This marriage question is a significant one for missionaries and church planters, because we will always be dealing with co-habiting couples and we

⁷³ Phil (2007). "why do we need to push for mission." *Signposts*. Posted 17 March 2007.

⁷⁴ Geoff (2007). Comment to "Sources of Theology continued...". Posted 14 February 2007 in Geoff, *TheGeoff(r)eyport*.

need to know how to respond with both grace and truth.

So... what do you reckon? (Hamo, 16 September 2006)⁷⁵

When called on it by a reader, Garth apologises for appearing condescending in his discussions with his audience on a theological question, stating his desire to learn from those who care to comment on his blog.

I don't mean to present as contentious or condescending, I merely get frustrated, both in the church and outside of the church, where I feel a line of argument is more coercive than intelligent. [...] Personally I don't care for 'having to be right' i.e.; whether I influence another to believe me...it's not about winning. I far more enjoy exploring new/old questions in life, getting new perspectives to challenge my own dogmas [...] (Garth, 5 July 2006)⁷⁶

5.2.4 Support and welcome of readers

From time to time bloggers' responses to readers' comments will make explicit a gratitude for contributions, a desire to reinforce that comments are welcome and that readers may feel secure to make sincere statements without fear of personal criticism, and a desire to deepen the online relationship between bloggers and their readers. Some posts and comments by bloggers would make these desires explicit, such as in April 2007 when a commenter talked openly about her coming to terms with homosexuality in the Church on *Signposts* and was defended by the blog's

⁷⁵ Hamo (2006). "Married?... Or not?..." *Backyard missionary*. Posted 16 September 2006.

⁷⁶ Garth (2006). Comment to "Science, proof and miracles". Posted 5 July 2006 in Garth, *emergingBlurb*.

authors and other readers.⁷⁷ In another example, Alan offers support and seeks the same from other readers in the following comment.

For those who don't know Bob, he gets to go to some strage places and meet with some pretty powerful people. god is using him in very exceptional ways. Pray for wisdom for him. (Alan, 9 February 2007)⁷⁸

In other cases, bloggers would make a statement of affection or love, or use emoticons to express humour and emotion, as does Hamo, as he learns one of his readers has applied to be on a reality television show set in an old abbey.

now that would be a story for the Advocate!!!
wesssypressy girl turns nun :)
would you get excommunicated for that?...
i'll be praying... (Hamo, 10 July 2006)⁷⁹

Posts show a willingness among bloggers to also seek support from their readers, and offer thanks when it comes to them. Gaz, for example, gives his thanks to Steve for powerful words published in his blog, and Geoff turns to the blogosphere to help him overcome extraordinary struggles.

This was a powerful word for my wife and I who have just left the church I planted two years ago. We had some different opinions as to the direction of the group and had some angry and hurt people taking their emotions out on

⁷⁷ See Phil (2007). "more from Mike Frost." *Signposts*. Posted 9 April 2007.

⁷⁸ Alan (2007). Comment to "tfwuk". Posted 9 February 2007 in Alan, *The forgotten ways*.

⁷⁹ Hamo (2006). Comment to "5 Nuns Required". Posted 10 July 2006.

us. But these words are comforting and challenging at the same time.

Thanks. (Gaz, 4 April 2004)⁸⁰

It's just about getting to be too much – [...] It just keeps getting more and more crazy. Feel free to pray for me - I could use it right now. (Geoff, 21 July 2006)⁸¹

5.2.5 Self-presentation of bloggers and readers

In a number of sites, that will prove significant in the next chapter, bloggers engage in two types of practices in the endeavour to maintain relations with their readership. Firstly, some bloggers often make posts regarding their own blog and blogging behaviour. Secondly, they make use of available online tools, and ask questions directly to readers, to gather information about their readership. I will expand on each practice in turn.

As if assuming that audiences expect a regular publication of new posts, or perhaps to engender this expectation among readers, bloggers such as Stephen Said, Fernando and Geoff write posts and comments about their recent or long term blogging activity, announce upcoming periods of inactivity, or apologise for being away from their blog for some time.

What a crazy 200 posts they've been. There has been laughter, tears, anger, disappointment... and that's just in response to my jokes. (oh, did I mention groans) I must admit – when I started this deal out, I didn't really expect to see this blogging thing through for any length of time: I'd had a go or two before and they'd died pretty quickly. It's been pretty full on to see how

⁸⁰ Gaz (2007). Comment to "Words of strange encouragement". Posted 4 April 2007 in Steve, *World changers*.

⁸¹ Geoff (2006). "Chaos." *TheGeoffre(y)port*. Posted 21 July 2006.

much this blog has become a part of my process of working through things, as well as just a part of my daily life. (Geoff, 26 July 2006)⁸²

I am trying to find a rythm. Part of the struggle is trying to figure out what is appropriate to blog about and what should remain private. [...] So I thought that I would blog to say stuff is going on, but I just can't figure out what parts of that could be committed to the blogsphere. (Stephen Said, 14 August 2004)⁸³

Taking a few days away in from the desk for some summer relaxation. I'll be back later next week. In the meantime, here are a few posts from last summer that might be of interest. [...] (Fernando, 10 August 2006)⁸⁴

Bloggers such as Fernando and Dan announce future posts before they are published, or create serial posts, to keep readers informed of what will soon appear in their RSS reader programs.

One of the greatest thinkers of our time, Jean Baudrillard, has passed away in his home in Paris after a long illness. [...] So, over the next few weeks, I plan to blog through each chapter of the book *Passwords*, which was Baudrillard's own attempt at unravelling the key themes in his writing. (Fernando, 7 March 2007)⁸⁵

⁸² Geoff (2006). "The 200th GeoffRe(y)port – A Blogging Retrospective." *The Geoffre(y)port*. Posted 26 July 2006.

⁸³ Stephen Said (2006). "It's been a while." *neurotribe.net*. Posted 14 August 2006.

⁸⁴ Fernando (2006). "Short Summer Break." *Fernando's desk*. Posted 10 August 2006.

⁸⁵ Fernando (2007). "Jean Baudrillard." *Fernando's desk*. Posted 7 March 2007.

Last year, we did Mark for Lent on signposts, during which we considered 40 readings from Mark more or less on the 40 days of Lent. I wanted to do something similar this year, [...]

The idea is that I will post up (hopefully regularly) the daily reading with some of my own thoughts, and people are welcome to contribute to the discussion. [...]

Bloggers such as Vawz and John Smulo write posts with the sole purpose of inviting readers to write something about themselves, in an endeavour to raise their own knowledge of their audience.

Bulletin have just released the top 100 Australians of all time. I would like to (when I have time!) blog about their top 10. [...]

What about you? Who would you say should be in the list of the top 10 Aussies?

Who would be in the list of top ten influential people in your own life?

Let us all know - come on! (Vawz, 5 July 2006)⁸⁶

I was living in Australia on September 11, 2001. I went to sleep very tired that night. [...]

Can you remember where you were when you first heard about these events?

What were your initial thoughts and reactions? (John Smulo, 11 September 2006).⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Vawz (2006). "Top Ten Aussies of all time." *No guarantees*. Posted 5 July 2006.

⁸⁷ John Smulo (2006). "Where Were You On 9/11?" *SmuloSpace*. Posted 11 September 2006.

Matt and Geoff also use available tools, like online polls, and invite readers to submit to them, to acquire specific quantitative data about their audience.

Take a few moments to check out the new opinion pole Ive posted on my sidebar. What is your understanding of God? I'd be very interested to see where my readers - both the regulars and the casual visitors - see themselves.

This is a bit of an experiment for me so I'd also love to hear your feedback.

Do you understand all the terms for instance? Or is this way too obscure?

(Matt, 13 September 2006)⁸⁸

The last poll showed that quite a few of you have worked out the RSS Reader thing. So - how many blogs do you get on? Let me know. Look off to the right and vote. And while your at it, got any recommended blogs? Add in comments here! (Geoff, 12 July 2006)⁸⁹

5.2.6 Support and welcome of other bloggers

Four bloggers like to alert readers to new members of the blogosphere. These bloggers use their sites for the promotion of the online work of others, as if introducing someone who has just entered the room of a party. Hamo offers an example:

He's new to the world of blogging, but at 23 years old he's almost a youth ministry veteran!

Here's a young bloke, with a great mind, huge energy and immense

⁸⁸ Matt (2006). "What Is Your Understanding of God?" *Eclectic itchings*. Posted 13 September 2006.

⁸⁹ Geoff (2006). "New Poll – Are You A Blogaholic?" *TheGeoffre(y)port*. Posted 12 July 2006.

potential. Aashish Parmar from Kalgoorlie Baptist Church has just started blogging and if he writes anything like he thinks then he will be well worth a read.

Aash was in my class this week and he's no mug! (Hamo, 10 August 2006)⁹⁰

Directing an author's own readership to other places in the blogosphere is also a tool for strengthening relationships with their audience. Geoff provides an instance of this, offering readers a list of links to peruse, showing readers the online world in which he resides.

I've been pretty slack at posting anything (intensive week at Tabor), but here are some links to good things happening in the blogosphere that you might like to have a look at. [...]

Grendel and God - Speaking of atheists, the Backyard Missionary guy (Hamo) has gone on holiday and turned his blog over to an atheist (insert mock shocked sounds here). He's written some very thought provoking posts (and some interesting coffee snob revelations too) so get in and allow yourself to get challenged a bit.

No Hint Of Morality - She posted it up a while ago, but Christina's post on the religious right and Christian ethics is a fantastic read. The piece by Brian McLaren that she links to is also very good. (Geoff, 9 October 2006)⁹¹

5.2.7 Discursive deliberations

In these posts and comments this researcher notes that:

⁹⁰ Hamo (2006). "A Youth Ministry Legend." *Backyard missionary*. Posted 10 August 2006.

⁹¹ Geoff (2006). "What you should have been reading while I wasn't posting...." *TheGeoffre(y)port*. Posted 9 October 2006.

1. Posts and comments display a general willingness by bloggers to present themselves as “conversation starters”, in that while they are entitled to an opinion on matters, they would not like to be seen as the expert, but welcome comments from different and opposing views.
2. While bloggers in the sample tend to show low tolerance for flaming, they tend to prefer other options than deleting comments and banning people from offering them.
3. For these bloggers, flaming consists of labelling blog authors and other readers as insufficiently Christian, immoral or fundamentally wrong. Bloggers make delineations in their posts and discussions between disagreeing with someone’s point of view and acts of exclusion.
4. Some bloggers engage in practices that enable them to gather more information about and foster bonds with readers. Posts that expose personal experiences and struggles, and notes of gratitude when readers do likewise, show these bloggers’ desire to know their readers on a personal level.

On one level these discursive practices appear consistent with bloggers’ religious convictions as expressed in the blogs, with regard to how Christians should relate to people of other beliefs and practices. On another level, they also appear consistent with the tensions highlighted in the previous section, with regard to understandings of authentic expression.

Furthermore, these practices shed some light on how these bloggers negotiate the bounds of the emerging church conversation or movement, i.e. who is part and who is not part of the conversation. The data show that ascribing oneself to certain beliefs, or refusing to ascribe, does not exclude one from participating in conversation in the blogosphere, though a couple of beliefs (shown in the previous section) may be necessary to identify oneself as an emerging church believer. Rather, the way one engages in such conversations will determine whether one is either

excluded or accepted. There is a discursive paradox apparent in the data that those who attempt to exclude people from the conversation will be excluded from the conversation.

While these posts and comments may show the boundary between “in” and “out” of the emerging church movement in the blogosphere, they do not inform the researcher on the strength of connections within that boundary. Nor do they show whether a blogger or reader is deep in the conversation or on the margins. The following sections intend to throw light on these issues.

5.3 Posts and comments about the Internet and bloggers’ place in the emerging church blogosphere

The act of conversation, in this media context, is an important site for the exploration of identity construction. In a place where people cannot bring their physical bodies, written text is the primary mode of self-expression, above the provision of other media texts, such as sound and photography. For participants in the blogosphere, the freedom to create and share these texts is paramount for the construction of authentic identities, yet bloggers recognised that in order to protect this freedom, the power to assert or impose some control is viewed as necessary. This is made apparent in this section.

This section will show some posts and comments made about bloggers’ attitudes to the Internet and blogging, and about their opinions of the emerging church movement/conversation as they find it online. This section will show what values these bloggers present about the medium in which they present them, and their understanding of their place and contribution to the evolving identity of the emerging church in the blogosphere.

5.3.1 On being online

No posts or comments were found during the sample period where bloggers made a claim for the essential goodness of the Internet. Two bloggers, however, affirm the creation of an opportunity for people to share stories and make relationships outside the confines of institutional church.

perhaps street art is an example of people's stories bursting into the world, i hate using the word "secular" but its a way in which people's spirituality and story has been able to explode and enter into the secular spaces, interestingly enough only to be painted over and cleaned up by the council before many people can access them.

i also wonder how much blogging/journalling online has become a space for people to share their spiritual stories without the church, but with a number of strangers and peers and onlookers participating. (Darren, 24 October 2006)⁹²

While the internet is often talked about for it's 'evils' I'm constantly discovering it to be a 'sacred space' where people explore what it means to find life. (Darren Rowse, 17 July 2006)⁹³

Making connections and developing relationships online are viewed positively by bloggers such as Cheryl and Craig, as a source of support for people who may be otherwise isolated.

One of the things that crossed my mind in a conversation about it this morning is that it might work if we go the monastic community line - a

⁹² Darren (2006). Comment to "wondering aloud". Posted 24 October 2006 in Cheryl, *[hold :: this space]*.

⁹³ Darren Rowse (2006). "Thinking about 'Ministry'." *Living room*. Posted 17 July 2006.

commitment to a rhythm of life, where the virtual community sustains us to live differently in our own contexts. (Cheryl, 24 October 2006)⁹⁴

yeah this really interests me. both personally and as I watch the twins online life and wonder about how much the church relies on face to face. I've always wanted to do some regular live online chat stuff as part of that too. and i like to think of people in diverse locations with some common symbols as well. (Craig, 30 October 2006)⁹⁵

The connections made possible online are at best a source of bemusement for Dave, who shares his surprise when mapping connections between bloggers whose sites he has encountered:

I was reading Danelle's hilarious reflections on Australian stereotypes today and it got me thinking about the weird connections that blogging causes. How does a random chick from Renton, WA who thinks Aussies live in tin sheds and say "crikey" even have an Australian readership? [...]
And I have a sneaking suspicion that when the whole truth comes out, Kevin Bacon will turn out the have been involved somehow. (Dave, 7 July 2006)⁹⁶

Others acknowledge that the blogosphere has negative potentials. Philjohnson, for example, laments the narcissistic attitude to which people approach online social media technologies.

⁹⁴ Cheryl (2006). "virtual church." [*hold :: this space*]. Posted 24 October 2006.

⁹⁵ Craig (2006). Comment to "virtual church". Posted 30 October 2006 in Cheryl, [*hold :: this space*].

⁹⁶ Dave (2006). "Six degrees." *Aropax® Nation*. Posted 7 July 2006.

To this I would add that the cult of the celebrity and its associated gossip offers a rather dubious and shallow model for other people to emulate on websites like MySpace and YouTube. There is much worthless material loaded onto websites and blogspots that undermines the intellectual and cultural value that ought to be manifested through this technology.

So what we end up with is web-content produced by people with pretensions of "stardom" who want to be noticed, yearn for widespread recognition, and hope to experience the "glamour" of being well-regarded.

The skewing of these desires is often hampered by poor forms of self-expression and coupled with inconsequential information that has little value. What the "preacher" in Ecclesiastes sagely said millennia ago could be rephrased for our context "of making many blogs and websites there is no end; and much Internet surfing is a weariness of the flesh." (Philjohnson, 9 April 2007)⁹⁷

Matt criticises those bloggers for whom counting visitors is a primary goal, to say that his objective is to connect with people.

[...] people are asking questions about the nature of "influence." I have a great comment on my blog about that. Part of what is wrong with the EC ghetto of the blogosphere is the way it is entrall to it's A-list celebrities.

Amongst the EC A-list there at least two blogs that I read for information purposes but have no influence on me and the same again that I neither read nor regard as useful (despite generating far more traffic than I ever will). [...] FWIW, the biggest slice of my blog's traffic comes from people who

⁹⁷ Philjonson (2007). "Blog Hype and Digital Narcissism." *Circle of pneuma*. Posted 9 April 2007.

neither have blogs, nor have a predeliction to comment on them. They are people I have actually met in the real world who are engaged in ministry and teaching. That "influence" matters far more to me than a technorati ranking. (Fernando, 21 July 2006)⁹⁸

It truly is the deep engagements that count. I prefer one good face to face conversation to a dozen blog hits. That's the influence I live for, to spend time sharing with others in the spiritual journey. And I get far more gratification out of interacting with people in comments and private emails than watching my tracker. (Matt, 21 July 2006)⁹⁹

Like Matt, Stephen Said claims that meeting and conversing with readers is more important for bloggers than receiving popularity or authority.

I was terribly disappointed to see that Robbie has taken all his stuff re: Post Chismatic down from his blog because it is going to be made a book. I thought that blogging was about creating a conversation? Yet all these good conversations get turned into books and thus monologues again. Oh well (says the purist in me)... (Stephen Said, 10 October 2006)¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Fernando (2006). Comment to "50 Most Influential Blogs". Posted 21 July 2006 in Matt, *Eclectic itchings*.

⁹⁹ Matt (2006). Comment to "50 Most Influential Blogs". Posted 21 July 2006 in Matt, *Eclectic itchings*.

¹⁰⁰ Stephen Said (2006). Comment to "No Pain, No Gain". Posted 10 October 2006 in Stephen Said, *Neurotribe.net*.

Fernando considers the practice of blogging for readers by those in professional ministry. For this blogger, connecting with people on the Internet brings ethical implications for clergy. He lists certain blogging conventions as important for professional conduct, including the citing of references and hyperlinks, and receiving comments with respect. For the blogger, these practices reflect proper ministry practice.

Consider the issue of citing references, or linkage. One of the conventions of blogging is that if a fellow blogger draws your attention to a piece, say in a magazine or newspaper (or another blog or YouTube), you reference both the destination piece and the blogger who found it for you. [...] This is more than just a failure of character, it is also potentially a failure as an educator/pastor/mentor. Citing your sources models your approach to research, to breadth of reading and filtering information. Linkage models discernment.

Finally, a failure to link well breaks the blogosphere. We are playing with a virtual ecclesiology here as links build networks and potentially relationships. It's the blogosphere's equivalent of word of mouth.

These kinds of ethical considerations also apply to comments. In part, this is why I think it is helpful for pastors (and theological educators) to blog - it puts us in contact with difference; with a world of opinion and ideas.

Responding to comments helps one deal with other points of view, with the times that people misunderstand what you are saying and even with your own errors in thought and judgement. (Fernando, 22 February 2007)¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Fernando (2007). "Ethics and Blogging." *Fernando's desk*. Posted 22 February 2007.

Yet for Digger, blogging fulfils both personal and professional needs, regardless of any connections that may be made with readers. This researcher declares that this post by Digger was written shortly after, and in direct response to, an interview conducted between the blogger and researcher.

Often for me I think [blogging is] about trying to help me sift through stuff that's going on in my head, but sometimes it is purely because something interests/excites/angers me and so I want to let others know.

Was also interesting thinking about the stage I went through with my blogging where I really cared how many people read my blog, and would fully just make up posts so that my readership wouldn't go down. Nowadays I couldn't really be bothered. It was cool seeing my hit counter quadruple in the week after I was on the TV/paper/radio, but nowadays I don't blog to get readers. If people read my stuff, then sweet, if not, then I'm ok with it.

(Digger 17 April 2007)¹⁰²

5.3.2 On authority in the blogosphere

The authority of religious offices, institutions and personalities is a major focus of debate in the emerging church. Likewise, the perception of authority of bloggers in the movement, and in relation to each other, is made explicit in discourse found online. Posts and comments identified in the sample show, at best, bloggers' ambivalence over Technorati authority rankings, and at worst, a disdain for it. For these authors, Technorati rankings are a poor measure of what they believe is real authority, serve only to exclude people from participation in the emerging church conversation, and highlight for them that the blogosphere is not an egalitarian environment.

¹⁰² Digger (2007). "Writing for readers." *No diggity*. Posted 17 April 2007.

Duncan shows his dismay at what he hears are people's thoughts of a top Technorati-ranked blogger:

Whatever the case, Dave's provided an excellent critique of the angst over who's influencing who in the Emerging Church conversation. I was at a seminar on missional church recently when the session leader suggested that Andrew Jones was the equivalent of the Pope in the international Emerging Church conversation. Surely!? The nature of 'emerging' is that most people involved in the grassroots could not care less about who is blogging, publishing, speaking, or leading excellent worship experiences in high profile events. (Duncan, 9 August 2006)¹⁰³

Together with Duncan, Matt and Philjohnson post lists of URLs of other bloggers in order to promote the sites of those with low rankings, in order to subvert the message that Technorati rankings give. Philjohnson offers this comment with his list:

I am also not interested in joining the "A-list" of most read EC blogs. I have composed items and will continue to do so irrespective of whether anybody visits the blog.

Lastly, does it really matter what electronic statistics are found at Technorati? The list of links and the corresponding ranks given there are, as far as I can make sense of them, rather ephemeral. The links and ranks are transient and begin to peter out after 120 days or so. I prefer to ask the question about the quality of the content of particular posts and of blogs: do they deserve the permanency that the printed-pixelated word achieves? Just as in pre-Internet days any odd-ball who could hold a biro could write and be

¹⁰³ Duncan (2006). "Emerging Church Bloggers." *Pacific highlander*. Posted 9 August 2006.

published, the same holds true for those who can co-ordinate their fingers over a keyboard. A highly ranked blog on technorati is not automatically coterminous with profundity of thought. (Philjohnson, 28 March 2007)¹⁰⁴

Fernando shares Philjohnson's doubt regarding the connection between Technorati ranking and good blogging.

[...] measuring influence in a meaningful way is interesting. Measuring by linkeage is one way, but not a good one when you look at the shopping list linkages on many blogs (inactive, assumed and vanity links). If you can tap into RSS reads and hits, that would be better. It's active traffic that counts. But the real measure of influence is, ummm, influence. Which blogs are introducing new ideas (ideas with legs), new words new concepts? Which blogs are changing the discourse, uncovering the hidden and so on? That's real influence. To measure that we need more than lists and quantitative measures, we need to read and interpret, to pick out trends and flows of ideas. Asuming of course that content, rather than just numbers, is what matters.

Sometimes we bloggers link to the good posts we read and sometimes we don't. That skews the linkeage to influence relationship. But perhaps more importantly, there are lots of blog-readers who are not bloggers (it would be interesting to see someone research that number). Linkeage doesn't seem a good way to measure influence there, either. (Fernando, 19 July 2006)¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Philjohnson (2007). "Emerging/Missional Bloggers." *Circle of pneuma*. Posted 28 March 2007.

¹⁰⁵ Fernando (2006). "This Is Not An Influential Emerging Church Blog." *Fernando's Desk*. Posted 19 July 2006.

Andy and Gaz provide a similar critique through self-deprecating humour.

well not content with sitting at the bottom of the blogpile i have now started
my quest to become a B-List blogger... Why you ask.... well i dunno why not!
The first part of my plan for blog domination is that i am "Feature Pastor" at
Ra'ah (thanks for the link love Wayne)
So look out Tall Skinny Kiwi and Jesus Creed here comes notyetfinished!
Ok i am sooo deluded (Andy, 29 May 2007)¹⁰⁶

It's official, I've removed Hamo's blog from my bloglist. So he's gone, out,
deceased (well in an online sort of way.)
If you don't know Hamo, he's a guy who used to blog a bit, had a couple of
people who read his site. But now he's gone.
So will Saintgaz rise up and take his place as King of the Bloggers. Wait and
see. (Gaz, 7 February 2007)¹⁰⁷

Fernando and Matt question the accuracy in Technorati's ranking in measuring popularity of readership.

About once a month I make a little time to look at the statistics for this blog.
I'm pleased that the readership is steadily growing, that more people on
commenting and emailing me (though the email numbers are still a lot
greater than the comments). The geographical diversity of the blog's
readership is increasing and it looks like the people who visit this blog are
reading more posts while they are here. All good news.

¹⁰⁶ Andy (2007). "B-List here I come!" *Notyetfinished*. Posted 29 May 2007.

¹⁰⁷ Gaz (2007). "The King is Dead...." *Saintgaz strikes back*. Posted 7 February 2007.

[...] However, my technorati ranking keeps falling. I'm not worried about that, I don't blog for the ranking and my focus is just too narrow for this blog to ever be a massive hit. It's just a curious phenomenon that the ranking is moving in the opposite direction to the other indicators of the blog's health. (Fernando, 22 August 2006)¹⁰⁸

I noted our rankings in the EC leader board both vary significantly depending on whether you're search for "emerging church" or "emerging+church". This has already been noted by one respondent and highlights the problem of relying on search engine terms. What would happen, for instance, if I followed through with my grips about "emerging church" jargon and dropped references from my blog altogether? Would I suddenly drop to being a person of "zero influence", invisible to such researchers, even if I was still chatting about the same issues and engaging with the same people? It seems I may and it concerns me that this less than sentient technology subtly reinforces meticulous jargon usage. So beyond yourself, what about bloggers who influence the conversation without directly identifying with the labels at all? Do they get no acknowledgement either?

One more point to note. The technorati ranking system seems to place far more value on the number of "sites" connected to a given blog than the number of "links" so that could explain some differences. How valid this is as a measure of influence and what relative weights technorati applies

¹⁰⁸ Fernando (2006). "The Technorati Thing." *Fernando's desk*. Posted 22 August 2006.

between the two is just one other thing I think needs to be scrutinised.

(Matt, 20 July 2006)¹⁰⁹

5.3.3 On the emerging/missional church movement

Most bloggers in the sample acknowledge a global conversation is occurring about the role of the church in postmodern society, and label this conversation either emerging church or missional church. Prominent authors and speakers who have made important contributions to the conversation, as noted by bloggers in the sample, are Brian McLaren, Tom Lyberg, Scot McKnight, Alan Hirsch, Steve Collins, Steve Taylor, Spencer Burke, Pete Rollins and Jonny Baker. Bloggers have identified *Out of Ur* as an online resource for information about the emerging/missional church. They also note organisations that employ people to engage people and create resources for the continuing conversation. They are Ikon in the UK, Emergent Village in the USA and Forge in Australia.

Yet bloggers show their reticence to allow these people and organisations to speak for them. Bloggers are reluctant to identify themselves as belonging to the “emerging church movement” that the above identities point to or represent.

Cheryl, for example, critiques some of the work of Brian McLaren as borrowed from previous movements, such as Liberation and feminist theologies. In doing so she questions how ideas enter the emerging church conversation.

i really like Brian’s stuff - he did his empire talk, which is fabulous. I came away simultaneously inspired and really uncomfortable.

My discomfort comes from this: the kind of thinking that Brian is bringing to

¹⁰⁹ Matt (2006). Comment to “50 Most Influential Blogs”. Posted 20 July 2006 in Matt, *Eclectic itchings*.

our attention isn't new. Liberation and feminist theologians have been saying this kind of stuff for thirty or forty years. It's wonderful that the church is picking this stuff up, and that speakers like Brian are giving it credibility. I just can't quite believe that again it's the white, middle class, developed world males who are only ones who can give it credibility. Are we yet again perpetuating the belief that theology is only valid if it comes from that subsection of the community? (Cheryl, 11 March 2007)¹¹⁰

Dave critiques the emerging church's endeavours to revise theories of the identity of Jesus Christ.

[...] if there's anything I hate, it's asinine reassessments of what Jesus "really meant". Anyone who's read someone like John Dominic Crossan or is aware of the 19th century critical reappraisals of the life of Jesus will know that this is nothing new. Everyone's got an idea about who Jesus was and what he was like. And it usually starts with throwing out everything that we've previously accepted and replace it with ill-founded assertions.

I don't think the institutional church has got Jesus right much of the time, but I've got a beef with the tendency in the EC to make the kind of absolutist claims they decry in others. If you're claiming the "secret" or "lost" message of Jesus, isn't that an exclusive statement? Almost a gnostic higher knowledge?

The rugged "tell-it-like-it-is" Calvinistic Jesus that some follow is a distortion of the full, complex character we see in the Bible. But the "Buddy Christ"

¹¹⁰ Cheryl (2007). "dangerous stories." [*hold :: this space*]. Posted 11 March 2007.

we're seeing in some books is not the antidote we need. (Dave, 4 August 2006)¹¹¹

Bloggers such as Dave, Matt and Hamo agree with some public criticisms made against the emerging church movement, calling attention to the notion that not everyone in the conversation holds exactly the same theological position, and that a few published authors do not represent everyone involved.

The postmodern view, of course, is that there's really no such thing as 'too far'. The idea of orthodoxy is absolutist and the boundaries between what's in and what's out are blurry. But as Scot McKnight pointed out today, not everyone within the movement adheres to postmodernism. In fact, as Andy and I discussed when talking over Don Carson's critique of the EC's postmodern theology ("Becoming Conversant With The Emerging Church"), a lot of us are more keen on the movement for the exciting expressions of orthodox Christianity than for the postmodern theology. So sometimes we look at others in the conversation and wonder just how much we have in common. (Dave, 9 August 2006)¹¹²

[...] for those who feel the need to continue writing their critiques let me offer some guidelines: [...]

2) Make sure your research is expansive and accurate or your conclusions are gracious and provisional. With all due respect to my American friends, it

¹¹¹ Dave (2006). "The Heretic's Guide to the Secret, Lost, Really, Really Nice Message of Jesus." *Aropax® Nation*. Posted 4 August 2006.

¹¹² Dave (2006). "Boundaries." *Aropax® Nation*. Posted 9 August 2006.

seems that every critique I have read of the EC only addresses the USA scene and it does feel rather narrow in perspective. I would suggest that the shape the EC takes in the UK, NZ, Canada and Australia (to name just a few places) is as varied as the shape the mainstream conservative church takes. If you refer only to Dan Kimball, Doug Pagitt and Brian McClaren and then make some strong and vitriolic assertions, don't be surprised if some of us wonder about the credibility of your research and treat it with disdain.

3) Remember Brian McClaren is not our spokesperson - but he is a person. I

have never met Brian but I feel for the poor bloke. He is probably the most quoted of all so called EC leaders and yet I would not regard Brian as either my leader or as my spokesperson. For that matter there would be no American who I would feel could accurately speak for me or for the bulk of my Oz mates in similar situations. But please remember that Brian is a human being like the rest of us who is simply gracious enough to admit that he doesn't know everything about everything. (And as Ellie (see the comments) reminds us, Mike Frost and Alan Hirsch do not speak for the rest of the emerging church in Oz)

4) Not everyone is down on propositional truth in fact I don't think I know too many EC Aussies who would dismiss propositional truth at all. A more humble approach to scripture is not a denial of its truth, simply a recognition that we do not know completely. Please frame this correctly as you misrepresent many of us in this assertion.

5) Please don't tell me what I believe! You don't know me. You probably don't know 99% of people in EC's so please don't assume you know what we believe. I am constantly amazed at some of the stuff I am apparently signed on to! I am unashamedly conservative theologically, but I am willing to ask

questions and I am open to other people's questions. I think this is called 'learning'. [...] (Hamo, 20 July 2006)¹¹³

Matt writes that organisations that exist in Australia have no right to speak for the emerging church movement, but only participate in the conversation along with everyone else.

Actually, I should add that Fuzz Kitto is the sole official representative of Emergent in Australia. Thus 99.9% of the Emerging Church down under has no direct association with Emergent. This gives you an idea of just how off base Carson's critique is for us when he casually equates the two. Forge is the far bigger player in our context. I've met newbies at EC conferences here, who know all about Mike Frost, who've had to ask me "Who is Brian McLaren?" Emergent has important voices within its ranks, but they're not the only ones in the global scene. The conversation is far bigger than the US.

Yet there's lots of us who aren't part of Forge either. We all network with one another but we should not be confused with one another. Emergent and Forge are merely important nodes within the broader Emerging Church network. (Matt, 23 July 2006)¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Hamo (2006). "Guidelines for Critiquing the Emerging Church." *Backyard missionary*. Posted 20 July 2006.

¹¹⁴ Matt (2006). Comment to "The Amusement Index". Posted 23 July 2006 in Matt, *Eclectic itchings*.

Given the label “conversation” that is applied, and given that is seen as a postmodern critique of institutional religion, painting everyone by the same brush seems absurd to bloggers such as Garth and Gaz.

It's not often I talk about the emerging church but here's a definition that I find interesting. [...] “The emergent church is a “flock of singularities,” meaning that it's like a bunch of different birds that all fly together in some kind of loose formation.” (Gaz, 28 August 2006)¹¹⁵

I think ‘branding’ is such a pre-supposed notion....you must have a name, you must be in a box, you must be definable. Surely a definable postmodern church movement is an oxymoron....comparison are fine, but labels tend to become inaccurate for what has burgeoned as a diverse church that has broken itself “out of the box”. I’m sure my emergent notions are fleshed out in very different ways to other EC churches...and that should be a good thing as we continue to “be all things to all men” rather than just a liberal or conservative branch of the same faith. (Garth, 24 July 2006)¹¹⁶

Bloggers such as The Rev, Philjohnson and Hamo find it uneasy to accept the label “emerging church” applied to them or their sites, given their own personal critiques of some of its incarnations.

The uncomfortable fact is many Emerging Missional Churches are doing the same bloody thing!!! Just trying to be the next hip thing, relevant, creative

¹¹⁵ Gaz (2006). “Emerging Definitions.” *Saintgaz strikes back*. Posted 28 August 2006.

¹¹⁶ Garth (2006). Comment to “Guidelines for Critiquing the Emerging Church”. Posted 24 July 2006 in Hamo, *backyard missionary*.

and cool as. They are made up of people that don't want to wake up early on Sunday, want to drink their wine, and say naughty words. I give them the same message. Jesus didn't call us to be cool, comfortable and casual. He calls us to follow. Now that means we can be creative, we can gather in cafe's if we want, we can refuse to buy into legalism, but it also means we are to give up our security, to leave our comfort behind, to make sacrifices, and to love even when it is hardest. To care for the least of these, to share our bread with the hungry and our homes with the homeless. To welcome the strangers, the outcasts, the oppressed. (The Rev, 8 April 2007)¹¹⁷

I am sooo very tired of reading many inaccurate critiques of this beast that is labelled 'the emerging church'. And while its a tag that I don't much care for (because of the associated vagaries) it is also a label that I find myself sitting under for better or worse. (Hamo, 20 July 2006)¹¹⁸

As for myself, I really do not identify with the "emerging" tags. Quite apart from the raging arguments over what the term means and signifies, I am not pioneering a congregational experiment. [...]

Circle of Pneuma has had as part of its portfolio many comments directed toward the Internet conversation about "emerging churches", but the blog

¹¹⁷ The Rev (2007). Comment to "Wolfgang Simpson". Posted 8 April 2007 in Phil, *Signposts*.

¹¹⁸ Hamo (2006). "Guidelines for Critiquing the Emerging Church." *Backyard missionary*. Posted 20 July 2006.

itself is not speaking from within any specific network, tribe, or experiment that is self-consciously part of EC. (Philjohnson, 28 March 2007)¹¹⁹

Alan, as quoted in an interview posted on Steve's blog, would like to identify himself as emerging, but is uneasy with the connotations, to the point that "emerging" may be linked to a certain style of church gathering. So he prefers the term missional, making distinctions between the two terms in this quotation.

I place myself within the Emerging church. But I am concerned that its movement ethos can be anxious and doubtful.

It must guard its ethos and focus on its transformative vision for the world.

The Emerging church must not lose its sense of the centrality of the Gospel.

It must remain confident in the message of the gospel. It must commit itself to a subversive orthodoxy— orthodoxy in the historic sense. [...]

I'm moving away from Emerging church as a term. I think it's been hijacked by side debates. Emerging is about contextualizing church and the Gospel in a postmodern world.

Context is a subset of missions. Missional church sees ourselves as a missional agency of God in the world. All churches have to be missional. Not all churches need to be "emerging". Established church can be missional.

Emerging churches can be non-missional and internally focused. (Steve, 27 February 2007)¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Philjohnson (2007). "Emerging/Missional Bloggers." *Circle of pneuma*. Posted 28 March 2007.

¹²⁰ Steve (2007). "10 questions for Alan Hirsch." *Worlds changers*. Posted 27 February 2007.

While the bloggers quoted above have some things to say about the emerging church, the following bloggers did not mention any involvement or opinion on the emerging/missional church or conversation at all during the sample: Jen, Themerryrose, Eddie, Andrew Johnson and Linzc.

5.3.4 Discursive deliberations

In these posts and comments this researcher notes that:

1. Bloggers approach the Internet as a space for the sharing of stories, experiences and opinions about religion beyond the confines of church. The Internet is either another “sacred place” or an opportunity to address the sacred/secular dichotomy.
2. Bloggers are not too naïve to appreciate that the blogosphere is not an egalitarian space. Some are wary of users’ campaigns for popularity and influence within the blogosphere.
3. Technorati’s idea of authority is considered highly suspect by most bloggers. Indeed, authority does not link to “good” blogging. For these bloggers, good blogging is original, well referenced, personal, reasoned and sensitive.
4. These bloggers carry the “emerging” or “missional” label with some trepidation, or refuse to carry them at all. They are aware that perceptions of the movement or conversation is less diverse than the reality, and strive to let this be known.

It may be said, then, that these bloggers are more comfortable being at the edge of the emerging church conversation than at the centre of it. As they grow to understand the blogosphere as a network of nodes, they identify their sites as places where the emerging church identity is challenged and negotiated rather than reinforced in any way. They tend to see themselves as “partly in and partly out” of the circle, or reject that there is such a circle at all. There is no desire to reach all people in the emerging church online debate, but create spaces for particular conversations within a network of discussions and relationships.

5.4 Design of blog pages

The home pages of blogs, or blog pages¹²¹, are as a matter of normal course, arranged according to the following structure:

1. A header at the top of the blog page, often containing a picture, logo or visual design, that also contains the blog's title and a tag line (a few words describing the purpose or theme of the blog, or the author)
2. A column to the left and/or right of the main body of the blog page. Most blogs have only one column on the right. This column may have user-defined content, such as a picture of the author, a longer description of the blog's theme or purpose. It may contain items showing the blogger's interests, such as books currently being read or favourite albums and movies. The column may also display "meta-data", i.e. data generated by the blog itself, such as lists of tags/labels applied to blog posts, the number of spam comments captured by data filtering software, a calendar of recent posts or links to archives. Traditionally, bloggers would create a list of other blogs and Internet sites that the blogger frequents, which would be listed in this column. Each of these lists and pieces of information are contained within boxes and are moveable as discrete design elements.
3. The main body of the blog page, listing the bloggers articles, with the most recently posted article appearing at the top. Blog pages would normally have no more than ten most recent posts on each page. The title of each post is normally hyperlinked to another page that contains the post followed by any comments made since its publication (often

¹²¹ Some blogging programs, such as WordPress, have a different definition for "blog pages": a section of a blog that are not labelled or ordered according to the date they are posted, and displayed on a different page on the blog's site. For the purpose of explaining blog design and layout, this researcher will refer to "blog pages" as the first page that one accesses to read a blogger's posts.

starting with the oldest post). The date and time of the post's publication would appear either near the post's title or at the end of the post. A link will be offered at the end of the post that readers who wish to comment can select. Tags/labels may also appear here, that would be hyperlinked to a page listing all posts that are similarly tagged.

4. A footer that gives information about the blogging software used, the name of the design template employed alongside its author and copyright information.

5.4.1 Blog design and blog purpose

The capacity of bloggers to manipulate the blog page's layout, or play with design elements, is limited by the affordances of the blogging software (of which the most commonly used are Blogger, WordPress and LiveJournal). It is also limited by the blogger's knowledge of the affordances of the software, or ability to write and edit HTML code to amend design elements (e.g. colour, fonts, etc) or layout (e.g. dimensions of the blog page and its elements, placing of elements such as sidebars). Nevertheless, all bloggers have the opportunity to design (and play with design in) their blog pages to create and express their identity within the network and for their readership.

Many of these design elements reflect the purpose of the blog. The header of Hamo's *Backyard missionary*, for example, contains a photograph of a man standing on a beach staring out into the ocean.¹²² This reflects Hamo's focus on ministry in one of Perth's coastal suburbs. Philjohnson's *Circle of pneuma*¹²³ has a minimalistic design, ensuring that readers' attention is not diverted from posts. This reflects the author's emphasis on reasoned reflection and critique pertaining to the churches and their relationship with other faiths.

¹²² Hamo, *Backyard missionary*. Accessed 28 November 2006.

¹²³ Philjohnson, *Circle of pneuma*. Accessed 28 November 2006.

Many of these blog pages contain personal and identifying information. *The rev*, [hold :: space] and *Missional diatribe*, disclose locations of the authors' offices and contact details.¹²⁴ *Jen's musings* and *Eclectic itchings* display photographs of the authors (and many other blogs contain photographs and videos of the authors with friends and family, scattered through posts).¹²⁵ Many bloggers are keen to show their interests outside religion, such as cooking (*Mountain masala*), Australian Rules Football (*Saintgaz strikes back*), movies and music (*Planet telex*).¹²⁶

Two blogs however, are noted for shifting attention away from the authors toward the community of readers who make comments and engage in discussions. These are Alan's *The forgotten ways* and Phil and Dan's *Signposts*.¹²⁷ The design of Alan's blog brings readers' attention to a book recently published, of the same name. The colour scheme and fonts reflect the same found on the cover of the book. Posts and comments are drawn out of people's responses to a reading of the book. The design elements contained on the blog page of *Signposts* draw attention away from the authors toward the group of commenters. A lengthy blogroll lists the sites of regular commenters, who are called "Signposters", while the header contains a logo that represents a group of people involved in blog conversations more than the conversation starters.

¹²⁴ The rev, *The rev*. accessed 28 November 2006. Cheryl, [hold :: this space]. Accessed 28 November 2006. Andrew, *Missional diatribe*. Accessed 28 November 2006.

¹²⁵ Jen, *Jen's musings*. Accessed 28 November 2006. Matt, *Eclectic itchings*. Accessed 28 November 2006.

¹²⁶ Gaz, *Saintgaz strikes back*. Accessed 28 June 2007. Craig, *Mountain masala*. Accessed 28 November 2006. Darren, *Planet telex*. Accessed 28 June 2007.

¹²⁷ Phil and Dan, *Signposts*. Accessed 28 November 2006. Alan, *The forgotten ways*. Accessed 28 June 2007.

5.4.2 Intertextuality in design and layout

Intertextuality refers to the merging of texts from two or more different types of discourse (see Gee, 2005: 21). Five blog pages in the sample provide examples of intertextual play being exercised in the construction of the sites:

1. In the “About me” section of the front page of *Jen’s musings* (whose header and sidebars are different shades of pink), Jen describes herself as a “Joyous Christian chick”. An intertextual play between religious discourse (as found in prayers and hymns), and sexist language sets the scene for posts that are mainly focussed on justice issues relating to women in the world (such as women in poverty, women as refugees, etc.).¹²⁸
2. The header seen at the top of *[hold :: this space]* contains a photograph of words spray-painted on a wall. The graffiti reads: “Surely I thought the door was here”.¹²⁹
3. The sidebar of *Eclectic itchings* contains a list of articles previously posted on the site, as members of a series named “Meditations on the Tarot”. Each of these posts contains a picture of a tarot card, a description of the card, a small passage from the New Testament and the author’s reflection on the passage.¹³⁰
4. The blog title and username chosen by The rev refers less to his ordination than to his persona when participating in WWF-style wrestling. His “About me” section contains links to pictures of him playing the sport.¹³¹

¹²⁸ Jen, *Jen’s musings*. Accessed 28 November 2006.

¹²⁹ Cheryl, *[hold :: this space]*. Accessed 28 November 2006.

¹³⁰ Matt, *Eclectic itchings*. Accessed 28 November 2006.

¹³¹ The rev, *The rev*. accessed 28 November 2006.

5. Dave's tagline in *Aropax® nation* is "Disposable thoughts from a disposable boy" which refers to criticisms of Generations X and Y as discussed in contemporary punk music. Posts about religion and the search for meaning are organised according to tags that Dave labels "genres", and are related to music. Examples include "Gospel music", "Songs for the ladies" and "Old sad bastard music".¹³²

These literal and visual texts display a challenge to the held notions of appropriate and inappropriate religious discourse, and show the bloggers enjoy playing with dualisms, such as feminism/femininity, art/dirt, faith/doubt, Christian/pagan, sacred/secular, hope/meaninglessness.

5.4.3 Discursive deliberations

From a reading of blog pages this research has found, firstly, that bloggers endeavour to create online identities that relate to offline identities, and even invite readers to discover their offline selves. Two blogs, however, aim to create a group identity of bloggers and their audience rather than the individual identities of the authors.

Secondly, the researcher notes that intertextual play is employed by some bloggers to highlight a tension that has been mentioned earlier (section 5.1.7) – the orthodoxy-heresy tension. The use of text that is considered secular, or even inappropriate, for religious discourse helps to create an image of heretic in the blogger, that is supported by text found in their comments and posts.

5.5 Network data

This section will show how bloggers are connected to one another through both comments and hyperlinked references. Connections made between blogs were mapped according to the sex, identified denomination, occupation and location of the blogger, as well as according to their

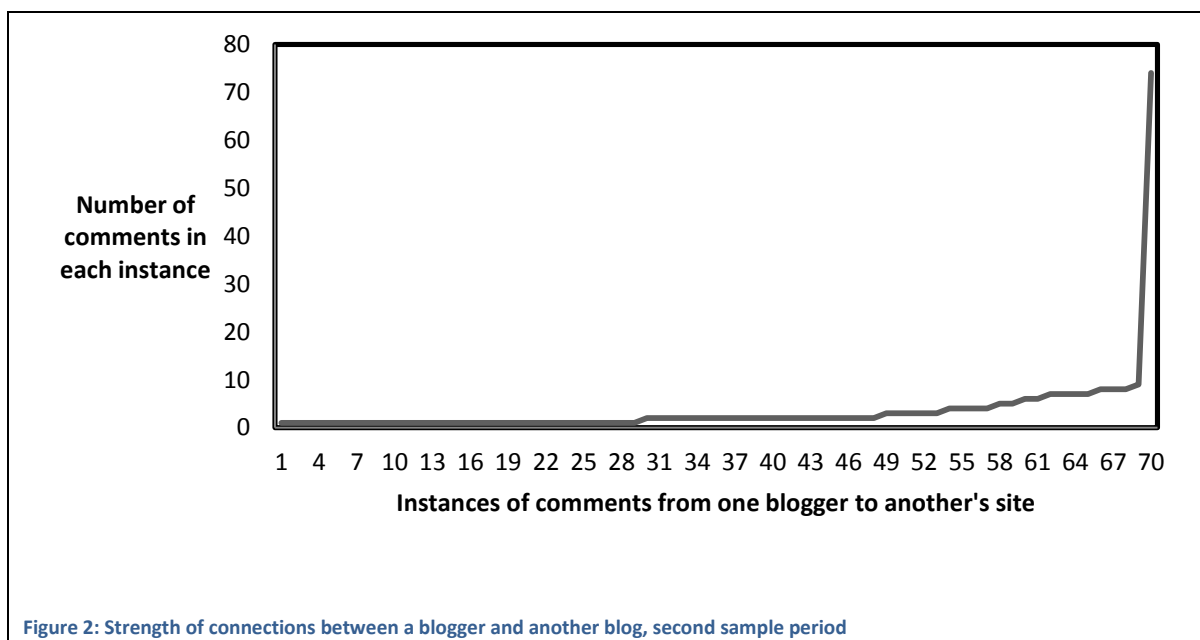
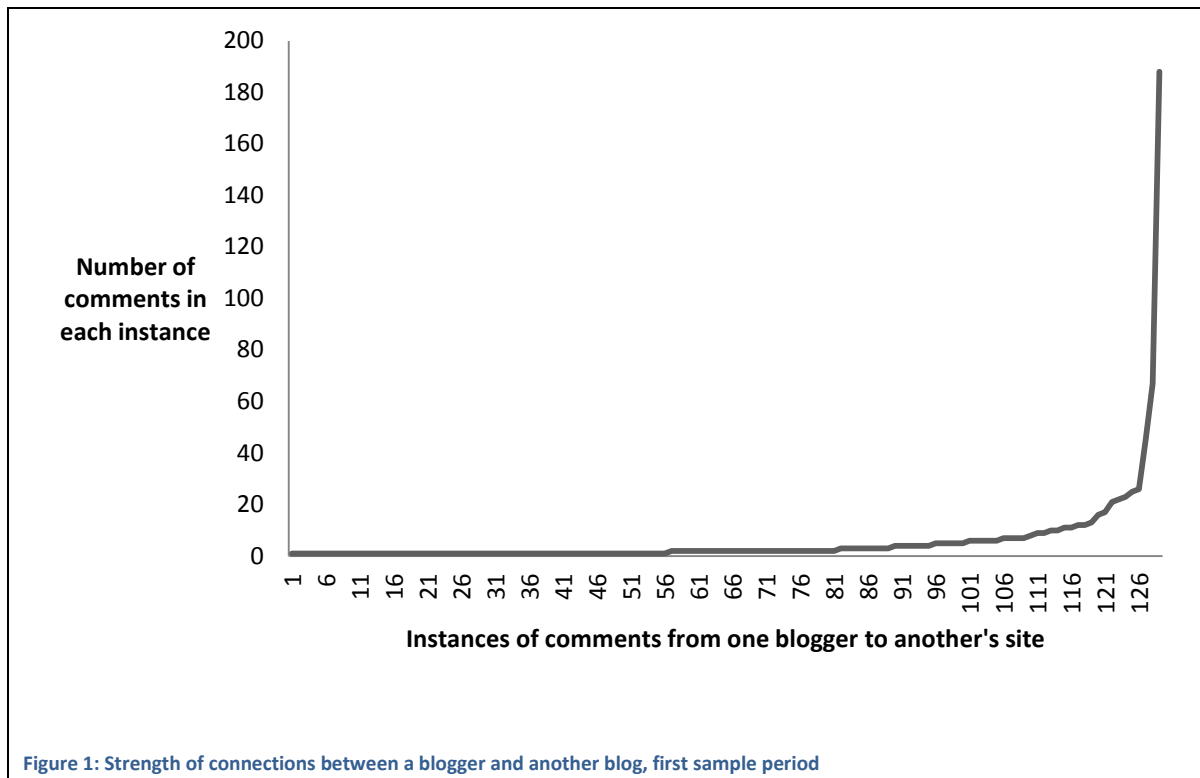
¹³² Dave, *Aropax® nation*. Accessed 28 November 2006.

connection to the organisation, Forge. Mapping connections according to Forge membership is of interest to the researcher because a significant number of bloggers mentioned in their posts that they were connected to the organisation, or debated whether the organisation can or cannot speak for or represent the emerging church movement in Australia. Thus it may be likely connections between bloggers are indicated by membership or connection to the organisation.

In constructing this network of connections through comments, this researcher asked whether offline connections, such as denomination and location, have an impact on online connections. In presenting the network of connections through hyperlinked references, this researcher sought to identify whether certain attributes of the bloggers attract such links. Such demographic data has been sourced either from a reading of bloggers' sites, or gathered from the bloggers themselves when interviewed by the researcher. Demographic data given by interviewees was not always given with permission to attribute to identifiable information, therefore neither blog names nor bloggers' usernames are given in this section of the chapter.

5.4.1 Network of comments

During the first sample period, 792 comments were counted as authored by bloggers in the sample and published on other sites. In the second sample period, only 255 comments were counted. In both periods, a vast number of these comments represented a single connection between a blogger and another blog, to the extent that most bloggers had received at least one comment from most others in the sample. However, if one defines an instance of one unique blogger commenting on the site of another unique blogger as a "connection", and if one considers that the "strength" of a connection is measured by the number of comments made from one blogger to another site, then one may allow the majority of these connections to be eliminated from a network study. In both sample periods, the number of strong connections is very small relative to the number of connections overall, to the extent that an exponential relationship is apparent, as illustrated in the following graphs.



Only those connections containing five comments or more are used in the network study of the first sample period, and those containing three or more comments in the study of the second sample period. This constitutes 34 connections in the first sample period, and 22 in the second. Therefore a connection containing five or more comments will be considered a “strong

connection” for the first sample period. Likewise, a connection containing three or more comments will be considered strong.

The following two figures show connections between bloggers, where the state from which they are blogging, or in the case of overseas bloggers, the state in which they used to live, are indicated by the shape of the vertex. The strength of a connection is indicated by the width of the arrow. The direction of the arrow indicates the direction of the comment, i.e. points away from the comment’s author toward the author of the blog in which it is published. Please note that of all the known locations of bloggers in the entire sample, only five of these are outside the metropolitan areas of each state’s capital city.

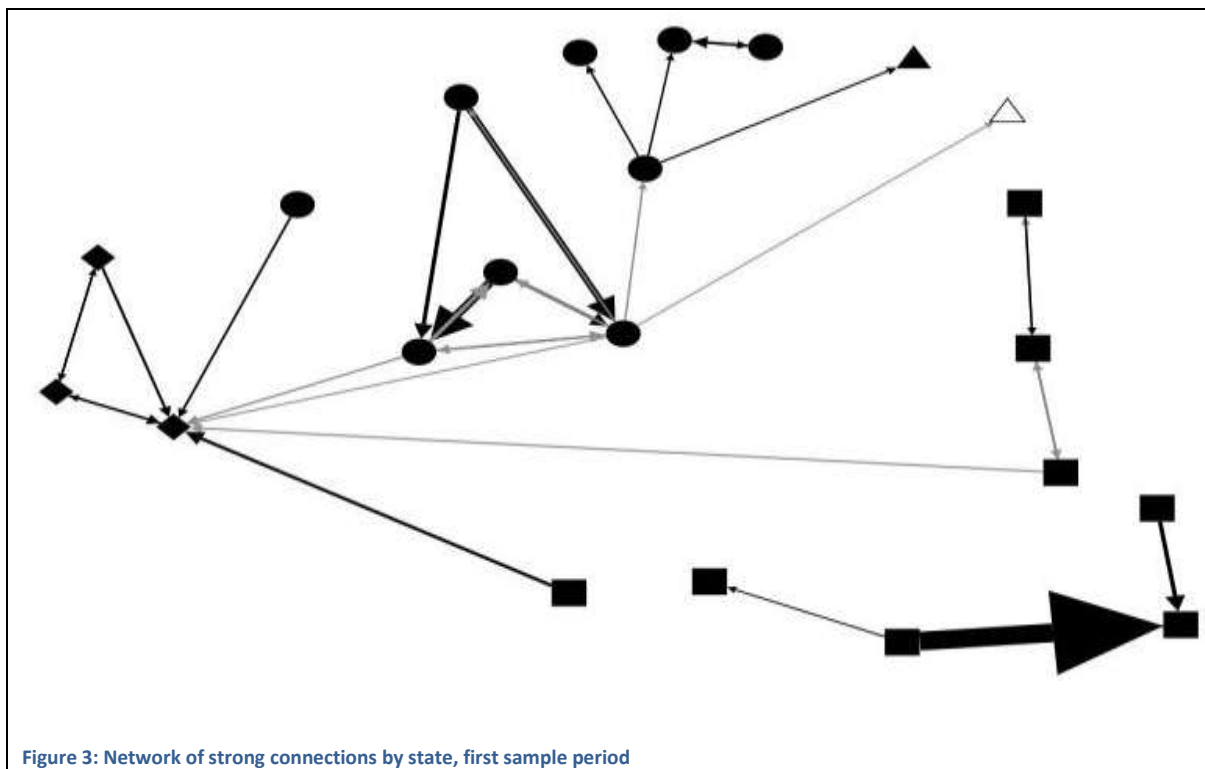


Figure three shows that only six strong connections cross state borders in the first sample periods and, of these strong connections, the strongest are within the state. Those blogs with relatively many strong connections, indicated by the vertices toward the centre of the graph, are more likely to have connections outside the state than those with relatively few connections. Those blogs with only one strong connection are likely to be connected to an interstate blogger. It is

worth noting that the circles and squares represent bloggers from New South Wales and Victoria, which are Australia's most populous states and where most of the bloggers in the sample reside, or resided before emigrating. Thus it is intuitive that these bloggers would find more strong connections within the state than, say, Queenslanders and South Australians (represented by the solid and outlined triangles).

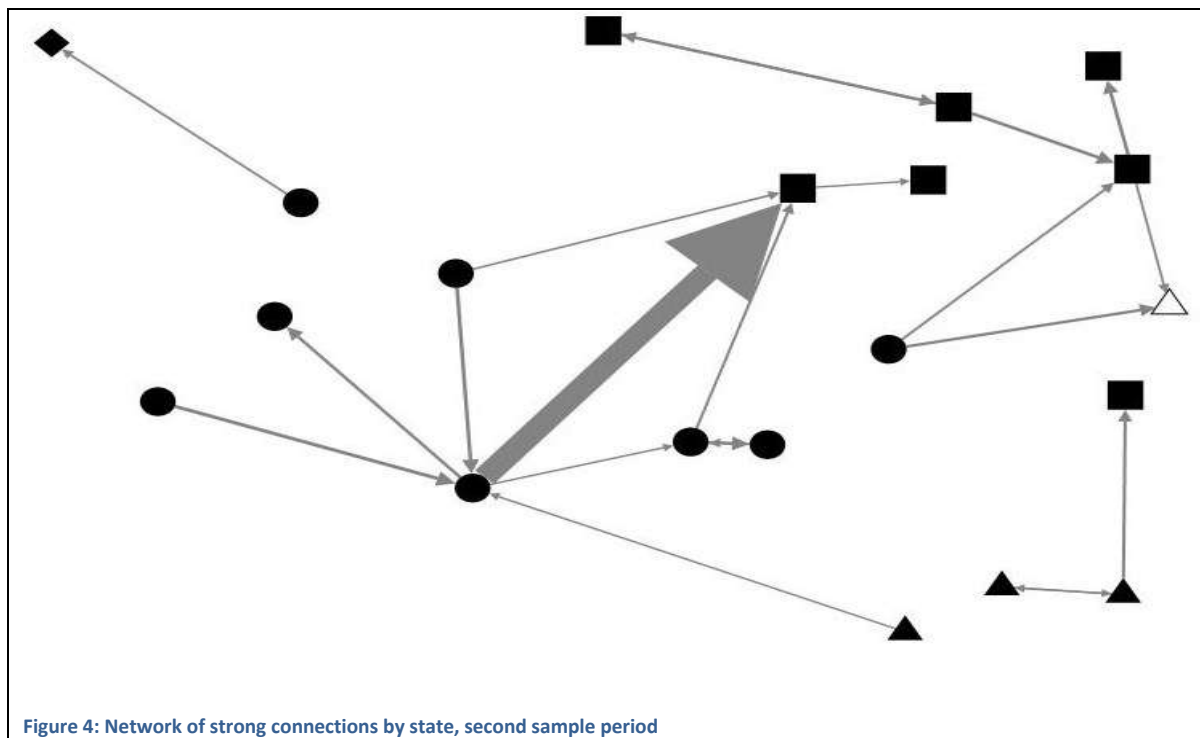
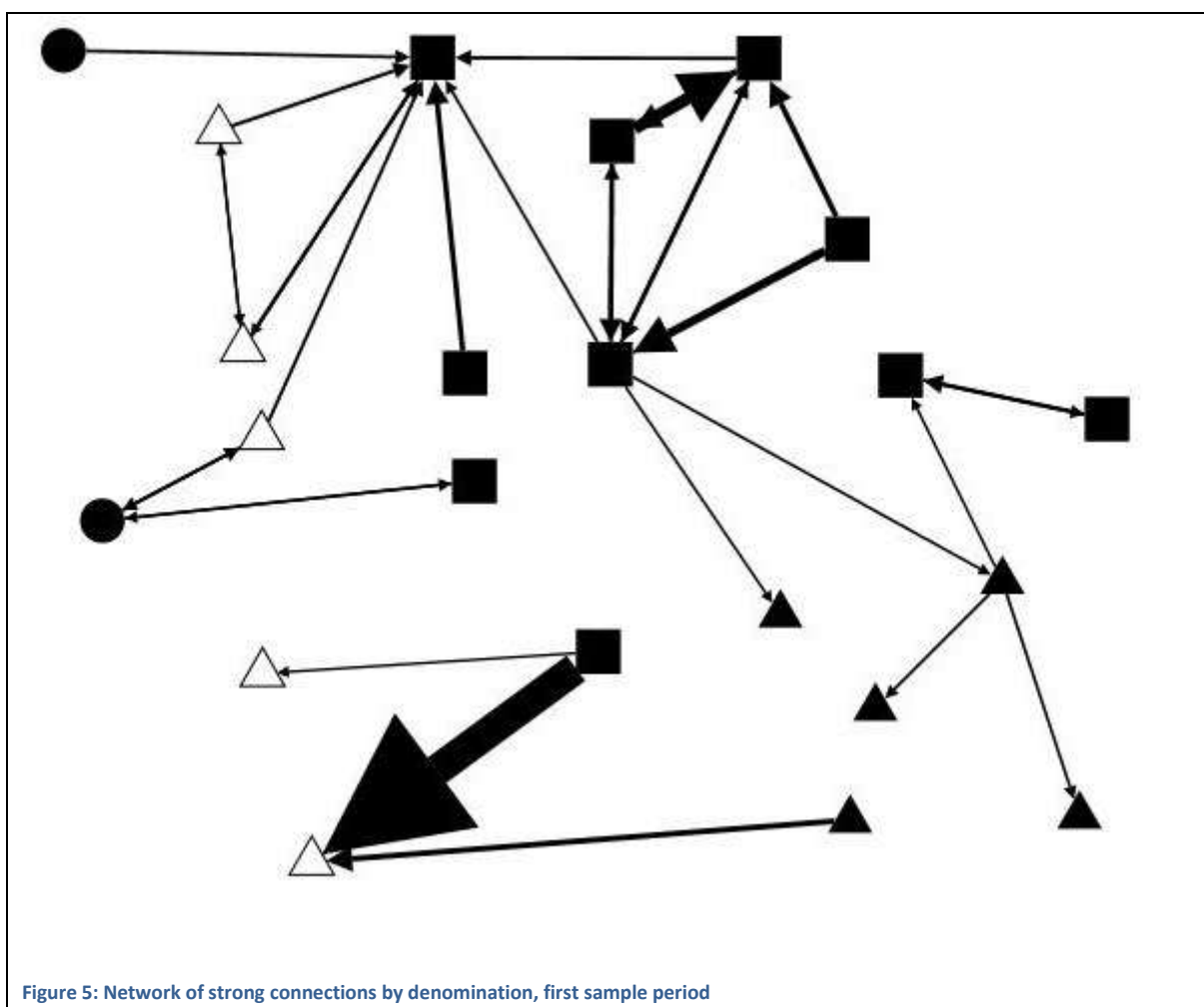


Figure four shows that location bears less weight on the number of strong connections in the second sample period than the first. Most strong connections, depicted by the vectors, are between bloggers of the same state. However, the strongest connection is across the border of Victoria and New South Wales, and those bloggers with less than three strong connections find their partners are interstate.

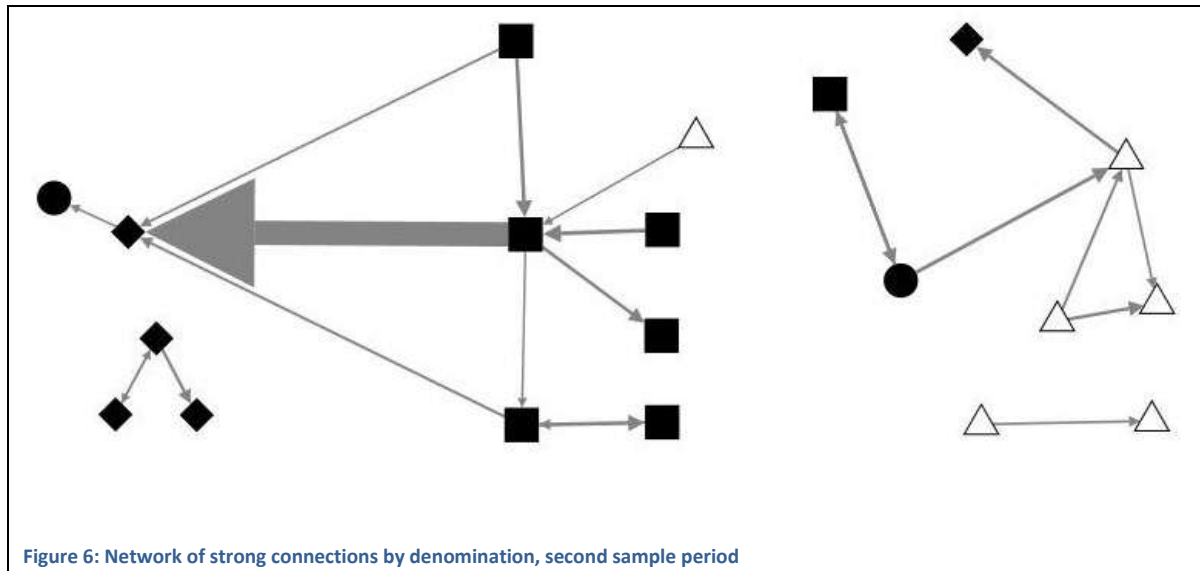
Both these figures show that the state in which two bloggers live is indicative of the strength between the two, though more indicative in the first sample period than in the second. This means that location in the offline world may have an impact on the number of comments received by one blogger from another, and vice versa.

The following two graphs consider the strength of connections between bloggers according to the bloggers' denomination. Most bloggers are Baptist, or from the Churches of Christ or Uniting Church in Australia, represented in the first graph by the solid square, solid triangle and outlined triangle. These are the only denominations that represent more than one of the sample's bloggers. Other bloggers identify as Anglican or Wesleyan Methodist, or of the Assemblies of God or the Association of Vineyard Churches, or are of a denomination not made known to the researcher. These bloggers are grouped together in the study, represented by the solid circle.



In the first sample period, strong connections appeared mostly between bloggers of either the same denomination, or between two particular denominations (indicated by the solid square and outlined triangle), including the strongest connection visible. Only six strong connections appear outside these properties.

In the second sample, the weight of denomination in indicating strong connection falls, with the strongest connection being across denominations. In the second sample, however, it is visible that many with only one or two strong connections are likely to be connected to a blogger of the same denomination.



The above two network graphs show that, like location, the denomination of two unique bloggers may be indicative of the strength of their connection. That is, it is more likely that a blogger would be strongly connected to another blogger of the same denomination than a different one. Like location, the network study suggests that belonging to the same offline group of churches may have an impact on how well a blogger knows another.

The following two graphs show strong connections between bloggers according to the blogger's profession, where the solid square indicates the blogger holds a professional position within a church, i.e. the blogger is an ordained person, is working as a minister in a congregation, is working for a religious organisation or teaches at a seminary or theological school. The solid disc represents a blogger who is not working in a religious setting, though they may volunteer or study in one.

Both of these graphs fail to show any discernable network distinctions between professionals in religious settings and those who do not fall into that category. Both religious professional and

non-religious professionals are seen close to the centre of the network, where they have many strong connections, and both are close to the edge of the network, where there are few such connections. What is visible, however, is that those bloggers who are not professionals in religious settings are more likely to comment on a religious professional's blogs than the other way around. In the first sample, 32 strong connections are counted in either direction, but only six of them flow from a religious professional to a non-religious professional. In the second sample, the figure is two out of 23. Of these eight strong connections, half of them are from bloggers who sit toward the edge of the network, i.e. have two or less strong connections with other bloggers.

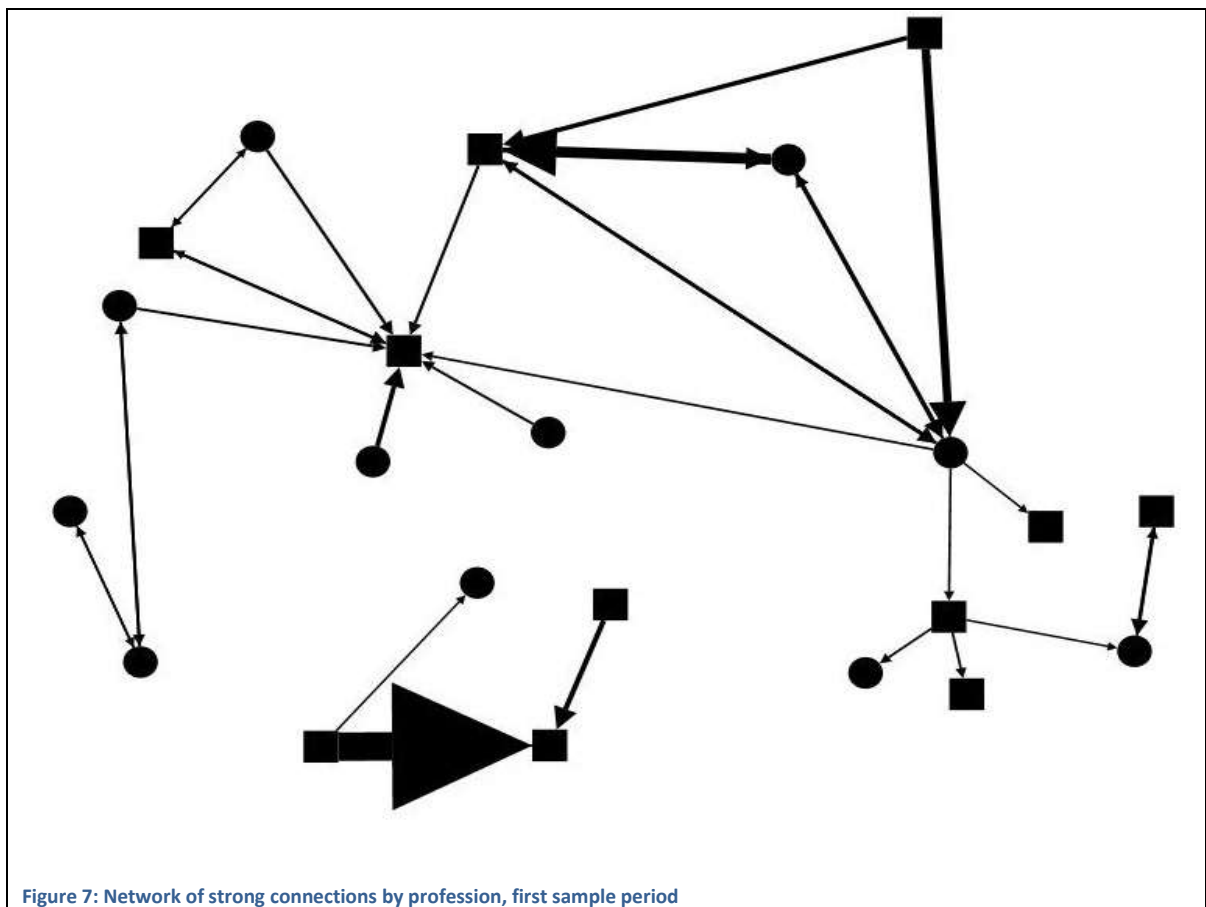
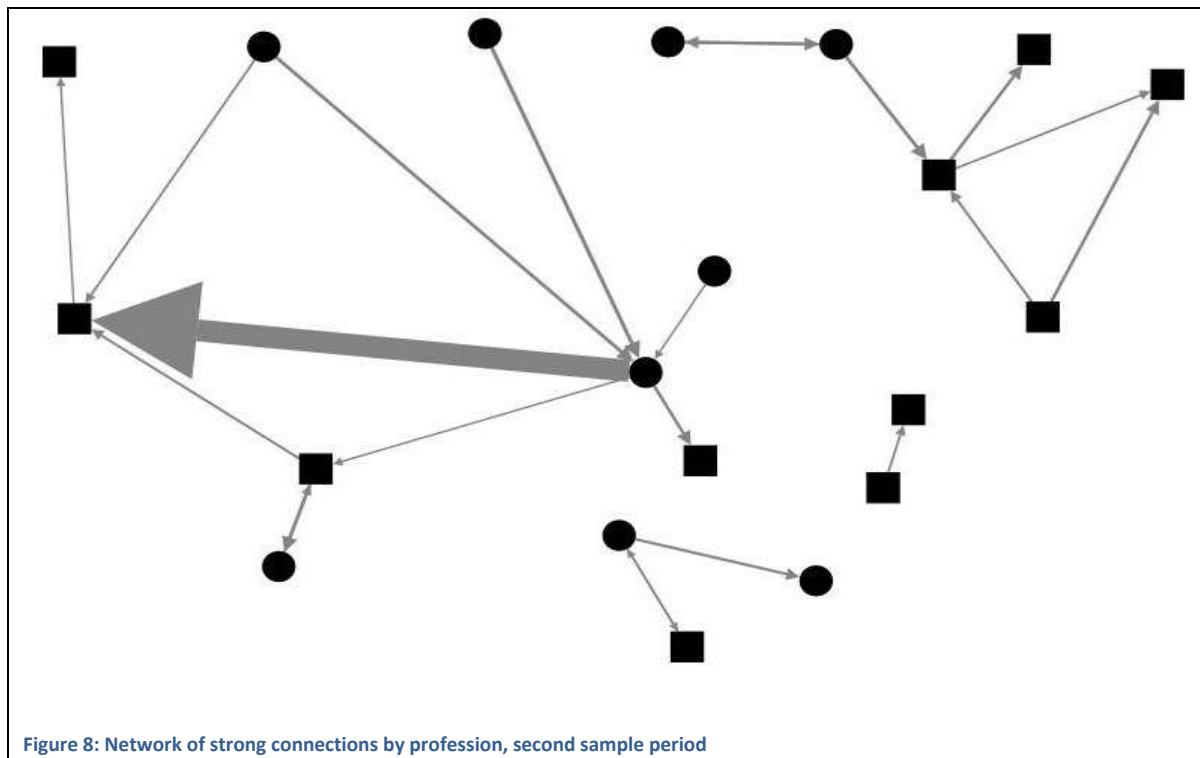
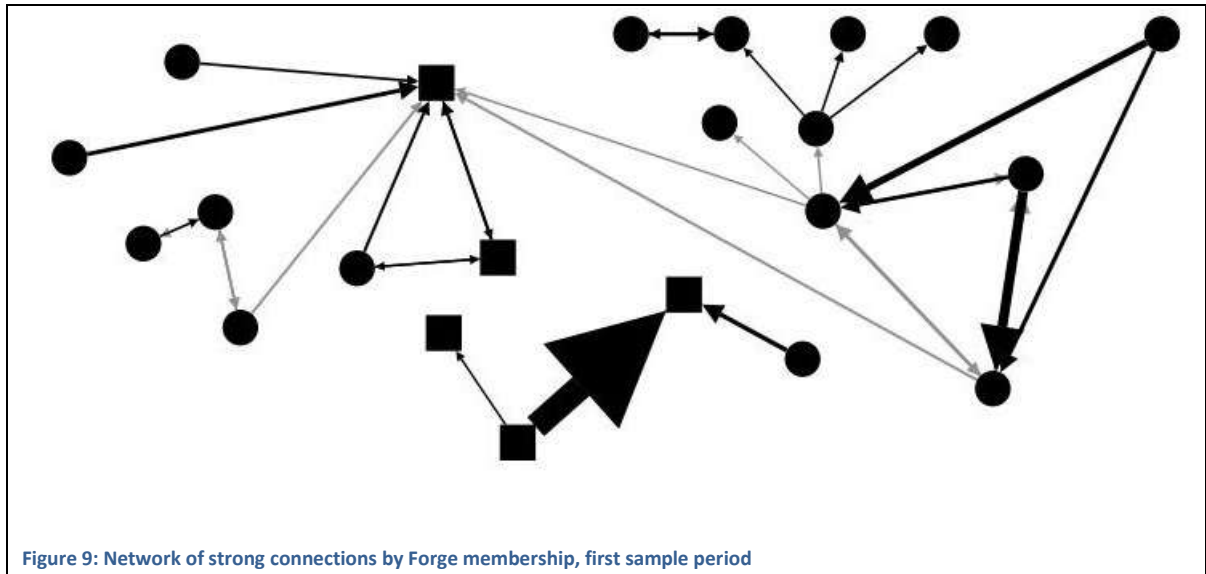


Figure 7: Network of strong connections by profession, first sample period

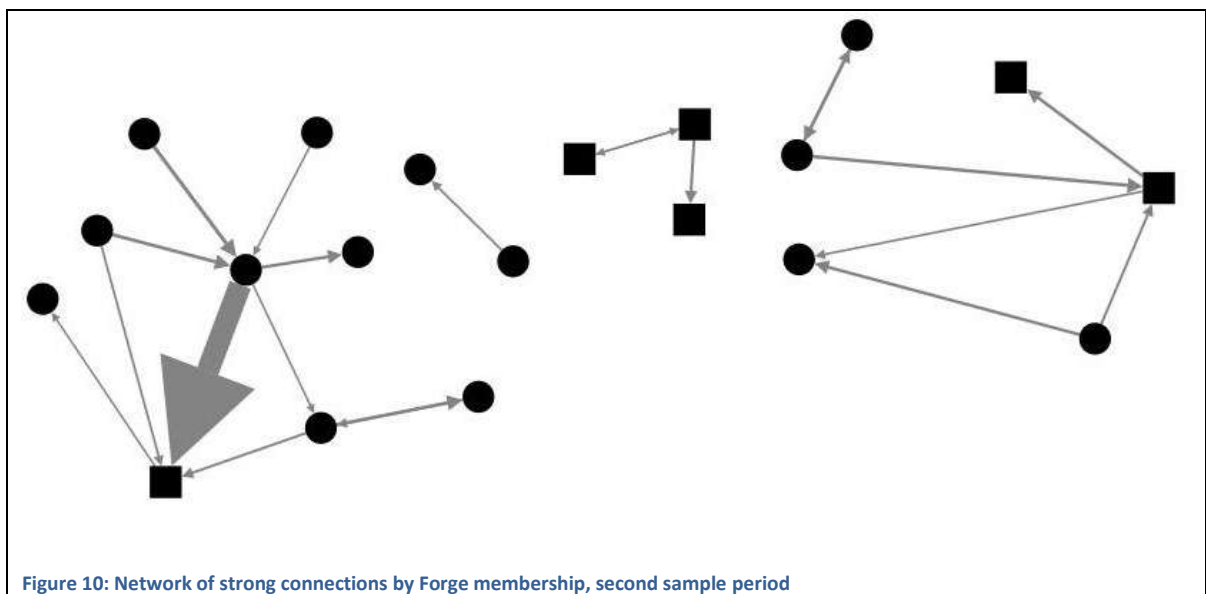


These two graphs show that the network study cannot say it is likely that connections between professionals in religious settings are stronger than connections between non-professionals, or between professionals and non-professionals. The two graphs show that professionals generate more comments from non-professionals than the other way around. This may suggest that professionals in religious settings are less likely to engage in conversations started by non-professionals.

The following graphs show strong connections between bloggers, where the solid square represents members of Forge, i.e. have mentioned on their blog that they hold a position in the organisation, or are hosting, attending or speaking at a function held by or on behalf of the organisation. It is visible in the first graph that the strongest connection is between two Forge members, and that one Forge member is close to the centre of the network, i.e. has many strong connections with others. The figure also shows that connections from Forge members to non-members are more likely than the other way around. The small number of Forge members compared to non-members intuitively suggests that most connections are from and to non-members, though, of the two bloggers with the most numerous strong connections, one is a Forge member.



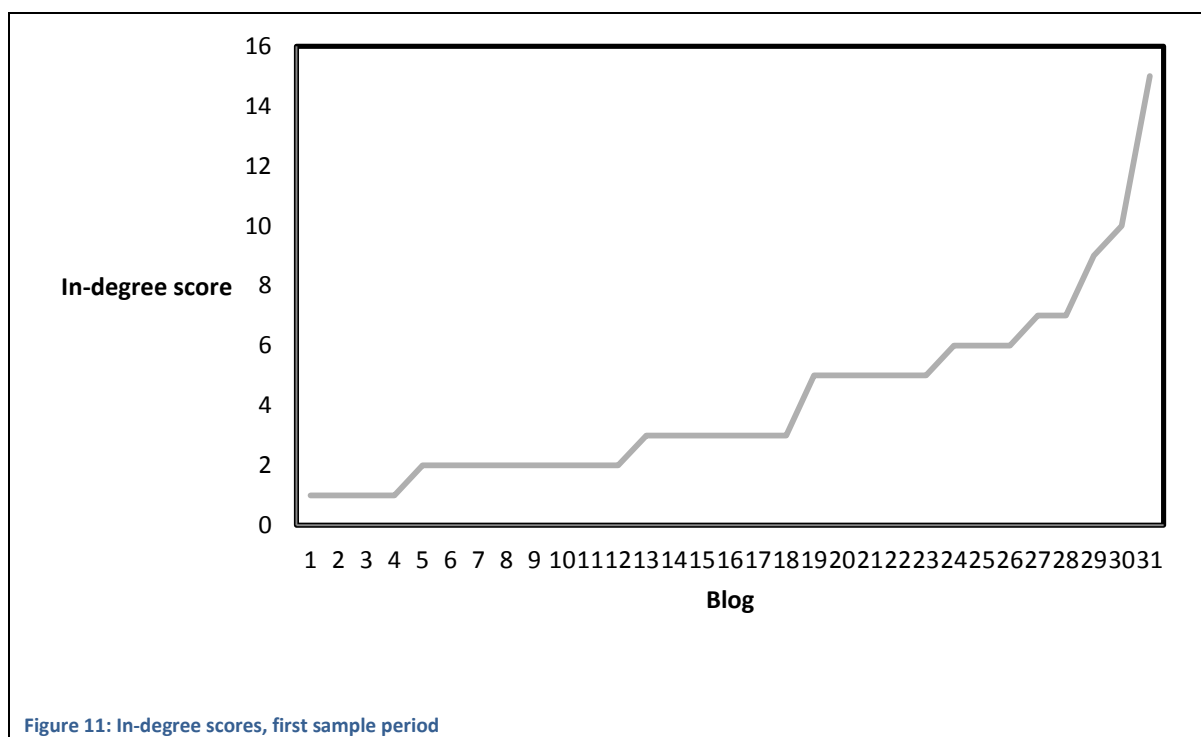
The particular Forge member who finds himself close to the centre of the network in Figure 9 did not contribute to his blog in the second sample period, which has great impact on the network study shown in figure 10. A non-member now has the most numerous strong connections. Also, since the previous sample period more of the sample's bloggers declare some involvement with Forge. Of the six members in the network study, four do not have any strong connections with non-members, and only two make comments more than three times on a non-member's blog.



The above two graphs show that connection to Forge is indicative of strong connections in the blogosphere. That is, bloggers who are members are likely to have strong connections online. The above graphs also show, however, that Forge members are only slightly more likely to be

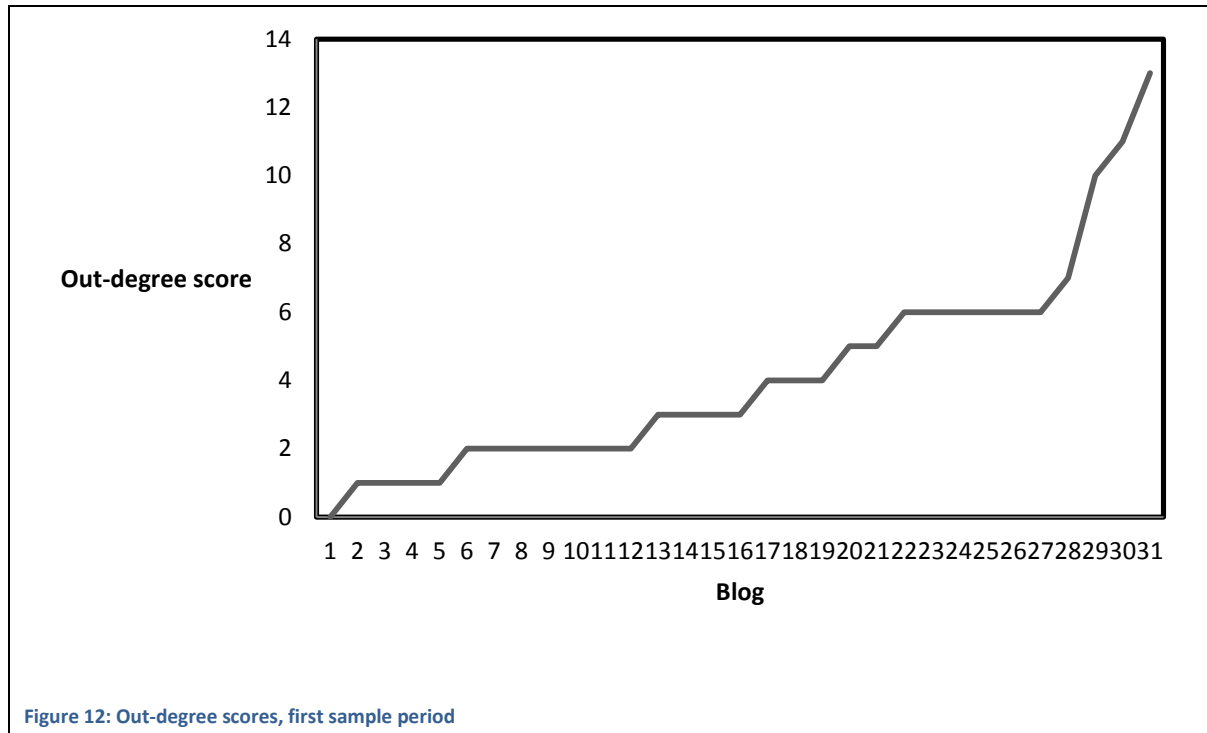
connected to non-members. Thus it may be said that connection to the organisation offline has an impact on the number of comments they will give to and receive from other members online.

It is mentioned in the Methodology chapter that the Excel add-in, NodeXL, was used to perform the network study of bloggers. This program also provides “in-degree” and “out-degree” scores, based on data inputted, given to bloggers. An in-degree score indicates the number of unique bloggers who have commented on their site. An out-degree score indicates the number of unique sites at which the blogger has submitted a comment. An in-degree score may indicate how widely one blogger in the sample of blog authors, while an out-degree score may indicate how widely one blogger engages in other conversations in the small portion of blogosphere studies by this researcher. The following four graphs show that a relatively small set of the sample’s bloggers share most of both the in-degree and out-degree scores awarded.

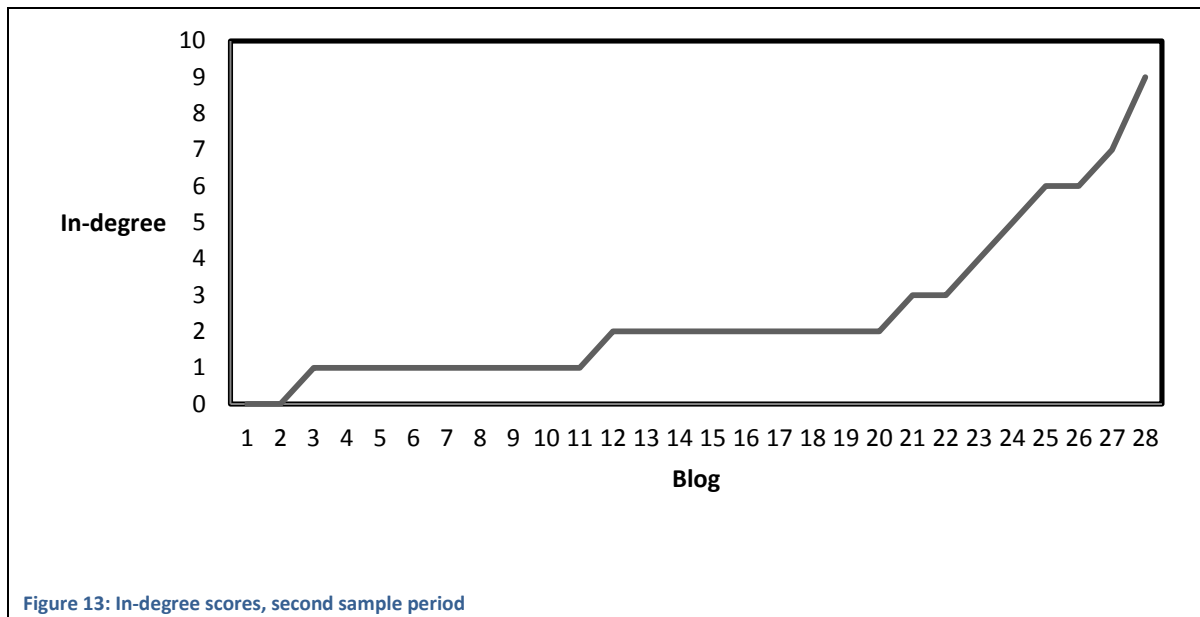


In the first sample period, eight bloggers received in-degree scores of 6 and above, while the top scorer’s had five more points than any other blogger. 25 bloggers scored less than six, showing that by far most bloggers received comments by fewer than six other bloggers in the sample. Of the top eight:

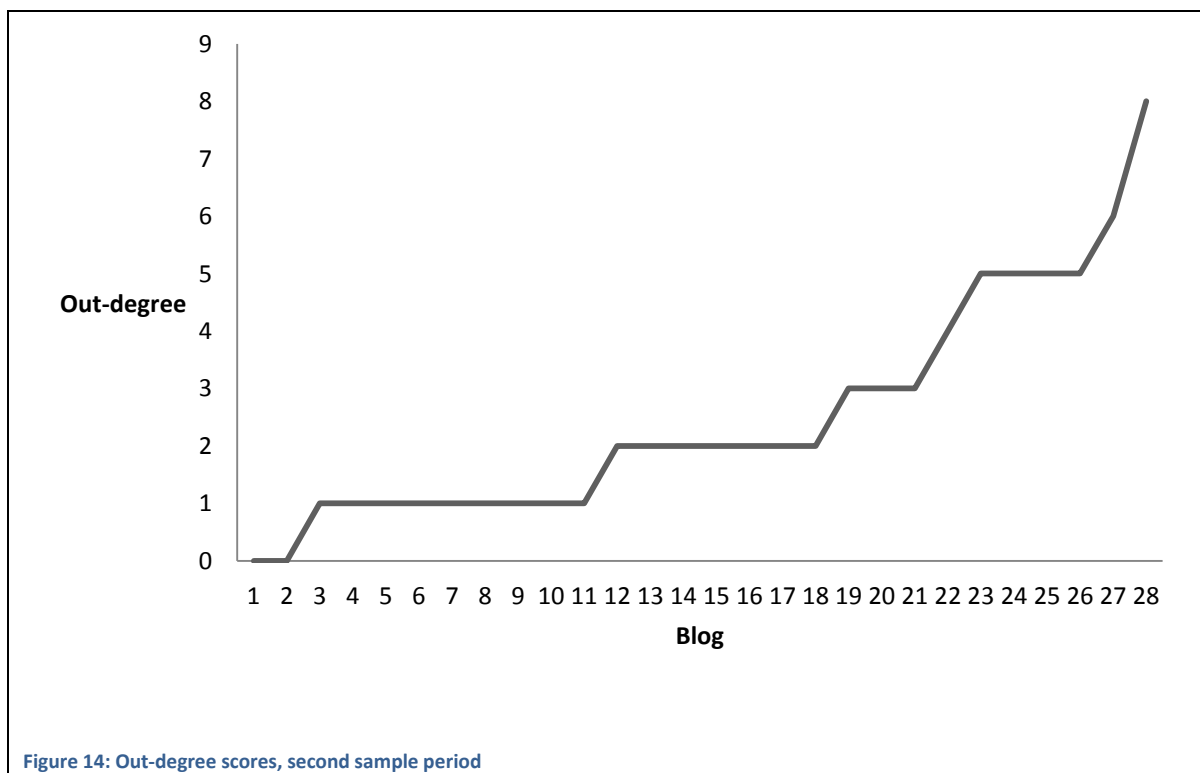
- 7 are male, while the other was a male-female team,
- 5 are professionals in religious settings, and
- 2 are members of Forge.



In the same sample period, only four bloggers received out-degree scores above 6, leaving 27 other bloggers commenting on six or fewer other blogs. Of these four all are male, 3 are professionals in religious settings, and one is a Forge member. Six other bloggers received a score of six, making the top ten having an out-degree score of 6 or above. Of these six, 2 are female, and one is a male-female team, 2 are professionals in a religious setting, and one is a Forge member.



In the second sample period, only five bloggers received an in-degree score of five or more. Of these, one is female and one is a male-female team, all but the top scorer are professionals in a religious setting, and 3 are Forge members. In the same period, six received an out-degree score of five or more. Of these six, one is female, half are professionals in a religious setting and half are Forge members.

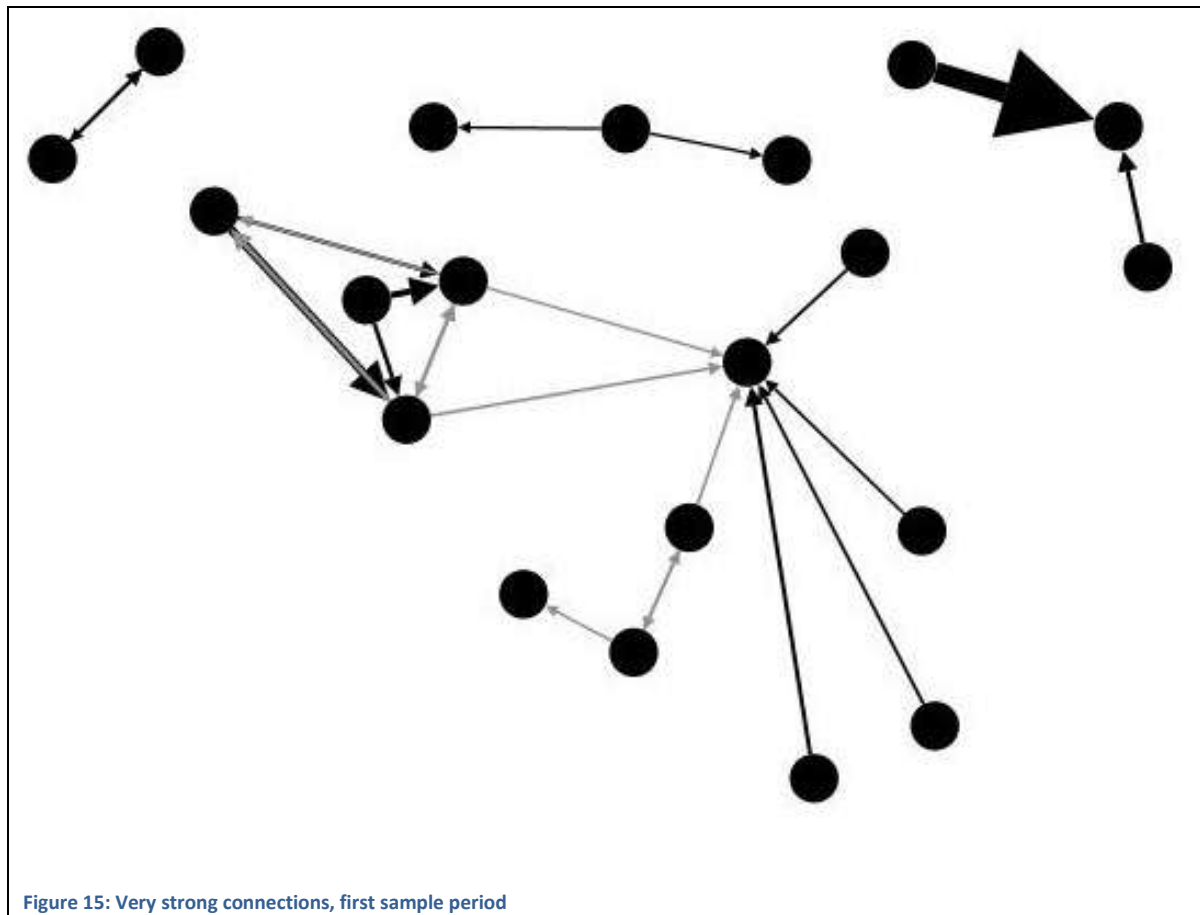


Strong connections do not indicate merely that one blogger reads another's blog. Weak connections do that. Strong connections may, however, indicate the capacity of "sociomental bonds" (as termed by Chayko (2002)) to be created and strengthened between blogger and commenter. As a strong connection represents a relatively high number of comments placed by one blogger on another's site, it may be deduced that either lengthy conversations are being held online between the bloggers (or between the commenter and other members of the site's audience) or that the commenter is confident enough to submit their opinion on a number of the blogger's posts. Thus strong connections may indicate the blogger and commenter are "getting to know" each other. From a network study of connections between the sample's bloggers through comments, this researcher notes that:

1. Online connections may be indicated by offline connections, either through denominational ties and geographical location.
2. Membership to the emerging church organisation, Forge, is a stronger indication of online connections in the second sample period than the first, due to the removal of a popular blogger and Forge member from the second sample, and an increase in the number of bloggers who declare a connection with Forge in the second sample period.
3. Males and professionals in religious settings are more likely to find themselves close to the centre of the network, given that they are more likely to have high in-degree and out-degree scores.

Before proceeding, this researcher must note that all data presented so far in this section show that the sample's bloggers are not tied to one another in a single cohesion. In the first sample period a separation between two groups of bloggers is quite visible, in that there are no strong connections between the two groups. In fact, if we define a "very strong" connection as containing seven or more comments from one blogger to another, and map the network

according to very strong connections, we can see four distinct groups, as illustrated in the following graph.



In the second sample period, four distinct groups are visible when considering connections containing the usual three or more comments. Therefore it may be said that while offline connections may indicate online connections, the reverse is also true. Offline distances may indicate online distances too.

5.4.2 Hyperlinked references

Hyperlinked references, like comments, show a connection between two bloggers. A hyperlinked reference is a link on a blogger's post or page (source) that readers can select to be taken to another blog article or page (destination). They are created by the source blogger to indicate a conversation or piece of information about which the blogger would like to write about on their own site. They also show that one blogger is driven to promote another blogger to their

readership in some way, and that they encourage their readers to visit the site of the other blogger. The hyperlinked reference is considered by those in the blogosphere an exchange of authority from the blogger who makes the link to the link's destination. These links are counted by search engines, such as Technorati, and are used to award blogs their authority ranking. Given that authority in the blogosphere is widely debated among bloggers in the sample, it is of interest to the researcher to discover whether and why some bloggers receive more links by other bloggers in the sample.

In the first sample periods, the 31 blogs studied contained 103 hyperlinked references to other blogs in the sample. Of these 103 links, 61 of them pointed to six blogs. These 61 references are distributed among the six blogs as shown in Table 2.

Most popular destinations	Number of references	Number of sources
Blog A	14	4
Blog B	13	7
Blog C	9	7
Blog D	9	2
Blog E	8	4
Blog F	8	5
Table 2: Most referred blogs, first sample period		

Note that there is significance in the difference between the number of references received by a blogger, and the number of sources from which references have come. Blog A, for instance, received fourteen references from only four other bloggers. It is possible, therefore, that as many as 13 of Blog A's posts have been referenced by one single blogger. It is also possible that Blog B received as many as 7 references for one of his or her posts, while the other 2 references came from one of those 7 sources for two other posts. It is helpful then, to consider the reception of

hyperlinked references according to the number of sources. NodeXL gives the researcher this information by awarding in-degree scores, as shown in Table 3.

Top in-degree scores	Number of sources	Number of references
Blog B	7	13
Blog C	7	9
Blog F	5	5
Blog E	4	8
Blog A	4	14

Table 3: Top in-degree scores, first sample period

Blog D does not appear in Table 3 as, with an in-degree score of 2, is far from the top five scorers.

Of these six blogs, all but one are authored by men, and the other is authored by a male-female team. All but one are authored by professionals in religious settings. Two blogs are authored by Forge members.

In the second study period, 68 references were made between the sample's bloggers. 38 of these references were pointed at only four sites. The following tables show similar data for the second sample period. The reader should note that labels given to blogs in the second sample do not correspond to the same label in Tables 2 and 3.

Most popular destinations	Number of references	Number of sources
Blog A	12	7
Blog B	12	4
Blog C	8	5
Blog D	6	2

Table 4: Most referred blogs, second sample period

Top in-degree scores	Number of sources	Number of references
Blog A	7	12
Blog C	5	8
Blog E	4	4
Blog B	4	12

Table 5: Top in-degree scores, second sample period

Though Blog E did not receive as many references as the top four blogs, it is possible that as few as one of the blogger's posts received four references from different sources, which places the blog among the top in-degree scorers for the sample period. Of the top four reference destinations, none are authored by woman. All but one are authored by professionals in religious settings. One of these four is a Forge member.

Table 6 shows the percentage of bloggers according to sex, profession and connection to Forge within the entire sample, and sets those figures against percentages of the same within the top reference destinations shown in previous tables.

% of entire sample (first period)	% of top destinations (first period)	% of entire sample (second period)	% of top destinations (second period)
55% professionals in religious settings	83%	67%	75%
28% Forge members	40%	41%	25%
12% female	10%	15%	0%

Table 6: Linkage indications

From a network study of connections between the sample's bloggers through hyperlinked references, this researcher notes that a blogger's sex and profession are indicators of a blogger's

authority as determined by links to their blog. While a blogger's connection to Forge may be seen as an indicator in the first period, it is contraindicative in the second. Though these conclusions tend to match similar data found in publications noted in the Literature review, they should be set against the limitations of the small size of the sample and the underrepresentation of women therein.

5.6 Interviews

As mentioned earlier, 26 of all bloggers in the sample were interviewed by this researcher. All 26 expressed their permission to have their usernames attributed to direct quotations. The interviews were conducted between September 2006 and May 2007. To protect individual bloggers from possible misinterpretation, names will not be attributed to paraphrasing. The results of the interviews are organized below according to information about their access to the Internet, motivations for blogging, bloggers' knowledge of their audience; bloggers relationship to other bloggers; and bloggers' opinions about the emerging church blogosphere. The average interview lasted 40 minutes, so a massive amount of information was gathered from 26 interviews. For the sake of brevity, only new information (i.e. that which could not be found in the public works of bloggers) will be discussed here.

5.6.1 Being online

Of the 26 bloggers, 18 of them mentioned to the researcher that they blogged both at work and at home. Only one of them talked about any specific blogging regimen, who mentioned to me he liked to blog during long commutes to and from work. Many instead said they blogged when the moment came to them. Five, however, mentioned that they tried to blog a certain number of times per week (for example, at least once or twice, or at least five times).

Two bloggers mentioned that they used blog-writing software installed on their computer that allowed them to blog when not connected to the Internet. This allowed them to write drafts of

posts in places where Internet connections were not available, such as on trains and in libraries and cafés. (These interviews were conducted before wireless (3G) Internet became readily available in Australia).

Of the interviewees, 21 told the researcher that they had either cable or DSL (broadband Internet) installed in the places they liked to blog, be it home, work or both. 12 of these had DSL Wi-Fi installed, allowing them to connect to the Internet from anywhere in the house or workplace. Of the 21, 15 of them told the researcher that when at home or work or both, they were connected to the Internet nearly all the time. Phil, for example, told the researcher

I have a notebook, which is on from [...] literally the time I wake up until the time I go to bed. Even when I'm watching TV sitting on the couch I have the notebook open, browsing and stuff or blogging. [...] it's with me all the time.

(Phil)

5.6.2 Motivations for blogging

The reasons why interviewees blog vary. Motivations range from developing a personal writing/journaling practice, through maintaining connections with others they've met offline, extending their social and professional networks, and contributing to online conversations in the wider blogosphere, right to creating online communities.

For 6 of them, blogging is either an opportunity to practise writing, or create a journal of thoughts. However for these interviewees the idea of writing for other people, to transform diary entries into discussions with others, is a key attraction to blogging over other media.

The original purpose was just to write. And I think the biggest purpose is I think to theologically reflect on, not just theology, but as theology applies to everyday life. I had a recent post on violence and how are we supposed to handle violence as Christians and deal other people's violence. It started as a

discussion between me and a friend who said that he doesn't think that violence is ever acceptable and I said "I don't know about that" so I posted my thoughts and started this discussion between various people, which was interesting. (Chris Logan)

Conversations with others are the main purpose of blogging for the majority of interviewees. In particular, maintaining connections with people that interviewees have met in other settings motivates them to keep blogging.

I fell into blogging. Matt had been blogging for a while and kept encouraging me to read his stuff. [. .] So I went on and had a look at his and then I realised that another friend of mine who was writing who had a link from Matt's site so I had a look at his and when I went to make a comment on his I had to log on, and so then I had to become a member to log on so I kind of created my own blog. And it was good procrastination from my exams at the time. [...] And then I was encouraged by people once I was blogging to keep doing it so I lasted for two months. And then after having a public kick up the pants from some Thin Places people [...] I've restarted blogging. (Jen)

Eight interviewees identify that blogging forms part of their professional practice, and see blogging as an extension of their community and workplace.

The website would be seen as a very important part of my work. [...] I wanted to have an Internet presence. Resources and stuff for people to download, and to tell the story of the project. And I knew I want to have some form of archiving [...] and blogging seemed the logical way to do that, both in terms of [...] ease, the ability to post things each day, [...]. But also in

a more accurate way of telling the story, instead of a month-by-month report. This way is more raw, I think, and I liked that. (Cheryl)

Now that I've taken up a position at Maroubra Baptist Church as "emerging generations" pastor [...] That then has prompted me to move my blog into a more public forum. Before then it was just friends and people I knew, but now I've given it more publicity. It's on my business card [...] It's been quite interesting now I'm working with people locally like other pastors. They turn up and they've read my blog. It's interesting that they've read all this stuff before they even meet me. I don't know if that's a positive or a negative yet.

(Andy)

Yet these bloggers recognise that blogging offers the freedom and risk to portray a personal identity that may conflict with the expectations of others as professionals in religious settings.

I want to blog my experience of what's happening in the church to try and keep it distant from the views of the church, because they're my views and I don't want it to turn a pastor's blog which just reinforces the message of the week. I still want to keep it pushing boundaries of thinking church and faith and things like that. (Andy)

I think for my personality something of that risk appeals to me. Pushing the envelope a little bit and having people respond in ways that are not always in agreeance with what I'm saying. I like that. Not always, at the same time I tend to avoid conflict so I ... But I do like that edgy, pushing-the-envelope and stretching people and being stretched myself. When people disagree with me I think that's good for me, as long as they keep it nice. (Vawz)

For nine interviewees, the desire to contribute to conversations they have encountered online has motivated them to start a blog. Philjohnson provides an example.

Creating dialogue with those who primarily see themselves as being within the broad umbrella of emerging church experiments and particularly to provide commentary on issues related to the rhetoric and slogans of missions that circulate in emerging church circles. [...] but especially with the recognition of the religious plurality especially new religions and alternate forms of spirituality which I have been engaged with since the late 1970s. [...] The concern that I have is that most of it is being ignored by those who consider themselves to be missional, and in my opinion, if they are genuinely being missional, it's going to be very difficult to avoid encountering these forms of spirituality among non-Christians.

Five bloggers believe their blogs to be online communities and/or discussion groups. For three of them, their blogs are alternative religious communities, connected with the offline communities in which they work as pastors. For one, it is a forum for non-Christians to be engaged in the emerging church/missional conversation. For another, it is a community of people who have gathered to respond to the (offline) published works of the blogger.

I've actually been intentional in trying to actually engage people from other religious movements on my blog. [...] Possibly a third of the people are non-Christian. [...] There's quite a few agnostics as well. But I also get the occasional pagan, I've had a lesbian Buddhist. I have all sorts of interesting characters at different times. I quite deliberately target people from other religions. (Matt)

The blogging thing was for [...] the reader to engage me in things I've written about, because I always think if someone's taken the time to read such a complex book I owe them some sort of responsibility. [...] Having read it, you can engage with others, having a discussion or a dialogue. And I generally let the discussions go along. I make comments along the way, but mostly I just let them roll. I'm interested in watching [discussions] evolve and unfold. [...] Honouring the audience, giving them access to the author, and to give back.

(Alan)

5.6.3 Bloggers and their audience

Six interviewees reported to the researcher that they were aware of readers other than those who make comments on their posts. All reported receive emails from friends and strangers who would like to discuss issues raised in posts privately. Four of these six, such as Andy, reported that they have met people in church and at meetings who approach them regarding their recent postings.

Now that I've taken up a position at Maroubra Baptist Church as "emerging generations" pastor [...] That then has prompted me to move my blog into a more public forum. Before then it was just friends and people I knew, but now I've given it more publicity. It's on my business card [...] It's been quite interesting now I'm working with people locally like other pastors. They turn up and they've read my blog. It's interesting that they've read all this stuff before they even meet me. I don't know if that's a positive or a negative yet.

(Andy)

Two of these six also told the researcher that they use analytical software to locate readers, regardless of whether the readers have commented. No identifying information can be gained

about the readership other than their IP address, but the software provides an idea of the range of readership.

For nine interviewees, like Kel and Matt, being able to connect with people through their blog is vitally important for their own faith development.

Blogs helped me detox from church. I've connected with many other bloggers, many of whom are not Christians. [...] What I read on their blogs have had some impact on what thought processes are going on for me, and I'll bring that to my blog. (Kel)

I wouldn't survive in a local church without connections like this. Talking with [other bloggers named] every other night sort of helps you survive [...] it's one thing being marginalised, it's another thing to be able to talk about it over the net. (Matt)

Yet for Matt, as well as two others, meeting someone online does not equate to “knowing” a person as much as an offline encounter.

It's a bit like an idiot-savant relationship. Through the blogs you know a lot about the person in a really narrow field. And it's not until you meet the person the relationship deepens, so I think people who have actually met having blogs, it's a different sort of community then. [...] It provides new opportunities but at the end of the day it's still not the same level of community. But it helps us keep in touch. (Matt)

5.6.4 Bloggers among others in the blogosphere

When asked by the researcher about the blogs that they enjoy reading, all but one mentioned blogs outside the sample. Three did not mention any blogs within the sample. Of the twenty-six,

12 explained that they read blogs that focus on conversations that would be considered only a small sub-section of the varied conversations that appear in the emerging church blogosphere. Two claimed their interest in Christian approaches to dialogue with other faiths. Six said their interest lies in alternative worship practices and alternative “theologies of worship”. One mentioned that his interest lies in church planting initiatives. The rest were interested in urban mission strategies and alternative theological methods. Of these 12, nine told the researcher they closely followed overseas blogs, from the UK and USA, and often conversed with them on each other’s sites. Five of these twelve reported having met them face-to-face and used the blogs to maintain friendships and the flow of resources and information. Of the entire group of interviewees, five reported keeping in close contact through the blogs with member of the organisation, Forge, and that the blogosphere helped them stay in touch in between conferences and meetings.

Also, of the twenty-six, eight also mentioned the importance of small friendship groups that interact through the blogs. These friendships are with members of the same state, if not the same city. For these eight interviewees, local connections have given them a sense of belonging in the blogosphere.

5.6.5 Bloggers and the emerging church blogosphere

It surprised the researcher to find that only one out of all interviewees referred to himself as an emerging church blogger. While most exhibited some level of tolerance at the idea that others viewed them as emerging church bloggers, Philjohnson refused the label outright.

I am not an emerging church blogger. I blog about the emerging church.

(Philjohnson)

Indeed, fourteen interviewees shared their critique of the emerging church movement, as they saw it, both in and out of the blogosphere. These critiques ranged from bloggers’ failure to

engage in grass roots mission to its focus on liberal critiques of traditional theology, as is seen in these three examples.

It's a conversation that I think is only useful if it's grounded at some point. I think there's way too much abstract theology in a whole lot of these blogs. That's nice, but it needs to be grounded at some point. My site is focussed on my particular reality. (Andrew)

In some cases the blogs - it's a case of "don't believe the hype really" - [...] the challenge for all bloggers is not to be armchair Christians, but get their hands dirty and engage with the world. (Dave)

Emerging church could encompass a lot of doctrine that could question the unquestionable. [...] I remember reading a critique made by the established church about the American emerging church questioning the virgin birth. I thought "Hey I agree with the established church on this one". [...] but when things take on a meaning that they were never intended to have. That's what I see the emerging church questioning. (Garth)

5.6.6 Discursive deliberations

From a collation of the data collected from interviews, this researcher notes that interviewees' religious identity emerges from two sets of tensions.

1. Given the high level of Internet access available to them, connections made or maintained online are significant in their religious life, and conversations held in blogs help make sense of offline religious experiences and relationships. Yet more important is involvement in offline settings. Many criticise emerging church conversations that are not grounded in local community and mission. Many believe that online connections do not equate to "knowing" a person until there is an offline encounter. The identity project of

the emerging church blogger is not cultivated solely online, but found in the flow between online and offline environments, and in the negotiation of their meaning and significance in relation to each other.

2. Though content enough to be considered as one “emerging church blogger” among others, it appears the most significant online networks for some are topic-based, or based on encounters made offline. These connections may be considered a small sub-section of the entire emerging church blogosphere, and not necessarily Australian. So while accepting that they are participating in the emerging church blogosphere, their perception is that the blogosphere is a network on which they reside in a small pocket on the edge. By no means, for these interviewees, is the blogosphere a group of people where everyone knows everyone else. If there’s an inner circle of emerging church bloggers, they’re not interested in being there.

6.0 Findings

The previous chapter has provided data from bloggers' posts and comments about Christianity, the emerging church, and the place of the Church in the world. It has provided data on bloggers' own faith practices, opinions about the practices of other Christians and non-Christians. It has given an overview of bloggers' own blogging practices, and ideas about how bloggers and commenters should behave online. The chapter included a study of network connections through both comments and hyperlinked references, and has given insight into the blogging practices, relationships with known audiences, and ideas about the emerging church made known through interviews between this researcher and select bloggers.

This data will be set against analytical tools introduced in the Methodology chapter. As outlined therein, the project of identity construction for emerging church bloggers is dependent on the creation of a setting of social interaction in which social trust is made known to them. In the blogosphere, discursive practices are built in interactions that may be identified at three levels: between the user and the technology; between the blogger and his or her audience (whether known or imagined); and between the blogger and other sites known to him or her. These discursive practices work towards the construction of identity through the exchange of (literal and visual) texts with shared meanings (*indexicality*), and through the positioning of themselves in relation to complementing or opposing beliefs, notions, opinions and values (*relationality*).

Four aims are set for this chapter. Firstly, this researcher will show how bloggers endeavour to make the blogosphere an environment to freely and safely develop religious identities. Then a nexus analysis conducted on the data will be offered. Thirdly, the researcher will outline the discursive tensions from which emerging church blogging identities emerge. The chapter will then conclude with an excursus on the nature of emerging church blogging identity.

6.1 Creating an authentic emerging church blogosphere: netiquette

As discussed in the literature review, according to Marshall, authenticity is a value of modernity that is tied to others such as individualism and personal freedom (2007: 105). In late modernity, authenticity is also valued against perceptions and critiques of public life as a performance, of fractured and fragmented identities, and of weakening and corruptible power structures in social institutions.

The emerging church movement holds authenticity as a prime value. The whole notion of being “missional” is wrapped in ideals of “being true” to both faith foundations, and to the cultural environment. Emerging churches strip away symbolic practices that are seen to have lost their authenticity – robes, processions, lengthy prayers and litanies – and experiment with new practices that are more true to everyday living and thinking.

Symbolic practices are often the focus of discussion in the emerging church blogosphere: what stays in, what is taken out, by what they are replaced. Bloggers intend to create an online environment where both bloggers and readers may express concerns that modern religious life does not reflect what is “inside them”. They desire to create a place to explore and evaluate what authentic religious life looks like. In the blogosphere, users endeavour to create a parliament on authenticity in Christian life. This parliament is founded on the values associated with the Internet: a place where the etiquettes and rules of proper religious communication may be lifted in favour of “getting real”.

Yet etiquette is found in all sites of human communication, a necessity that functions to “establish the nature of a situation, it’s predictability and whether the people involved can be trusted” (Marshall, 2007: 106). When in a social environment, humans search for cues that will show it is appropriate to express a certain identity, or safe enough to truthfully express what is “inside us”, what is true, and that others are in fact doing the same. So while the blogosphere is perceived as a place where the old rules of etiquette are evicted, other symbolic practices are

sought by users to create and recognise social trust. The following practices are examples found in the data that show bloggers' intentions to create an environment where social trust can be built: the downplay; the hat tip; codes of conduct; prayer requests; irreverence and intertextuality.

6.1.1 The downplay

Bloggers studied in the sample are nearly all either professionals or tertiary students, and have some degree of university education. Many have a theological qualification and/or some formal ministry training. Yet bloggers devalue their own training and education in conversations (though not those of others) to the point of self-deprecation. They do it a variety of ways:

1. Labelling their own opinions and propositions in posts and comments as “rants”, “random thoughts” or “musings”. These labels also appear as the titles of categories and tags, and titles or in subtitles of blogs themselves.
2. Using words and expressions such as “IMHO” (in my honest/humble opinion), “Not that I’m an expert but”, “I reckon” and “Just what I’m thinking about at the moment”.
3. If they do make a claim to some knowledge or expertise about a subject, it is based on claims of experience in church life or ministry, rather than education.

The etiquette practice of downplaying one’s authority or expertise represents two ideological stances. It firstly stands for the emerging church’s distaste for hierarchy. Though emerging church bloggers do not deny the benefits of good theological training, or are less than grateful for the opportunity to enter higher study, they do not want to set themselves apart from those without it. Secondly, it shows an interest in the private over the public. While posts and conversations may be centred on public issues, and bloggers recognise a public audience, they prefer a personal perspective. For them, any reference to qualifications represents a formal and public image, that masks a more private or inner perspective.

The practice of downplaying oneself is by no means particular to emerging church bloggers.

Bortree, for example, has noted in her study of teenaged female bloggers that self-deprecation is a common practice, in order to “balance between making modest claims that their close friends would accept and making inflated claims to promote themselves as socially competent, to impress the larger group of teens” (2005: 36).

6.1.2 The hat tip

The “hat tip”, sometimes abbreviated to HT, is a slang term found among some bloggers to prefix a hyperlinked reference to another source in blog posts and comments. As seen in the previous chapter, failure to reference sources is widely frowned upon by bloggers. Reasons for this have been made explicit in the sample of blog posts and comments:

1. Presenting someone else’s idea as one’s own is viewed as theft by bloggers.
2. Bloggers value connections. Sending out a hat tip alerts the source’s author of the reference, and creates a connection.
3. Links allow readers to choose to follow the link, empowering audiences to gain extra knowledge, and helping readers contribute to any conversation that may follow the post that contains the hat tip.

As Castells (2001: 37-38) has outlined, the contribution of academia into the cultural history of the Internet has inculcated in users of the Internet the principle of making reference to sources of knowledge. The “hat tip” has become for many bloggers an expression that denotes the same principle but conjures images of the communication of polite respect.

6.1.3 Codes of conduct

Much information has been provided regarding bloggers’ ideas about proper codes of conduct for both readers who make comments and other bloggers who write posts. These codes are published, negotiated and enforced by bloggers in order to:

1. Encourage people to respond to posts freely and honestly.
2. Promote the development of strong connections between bloggers and their readership.
3. Enable bloggers and their readership become more aware of the reality in and on which they converse, and together seek higher truths and encourage authentic religious discourse and practice.
4. Enable readers to “know” bloggers, and form expectations regarding the blogging practice of site authors.

6.1.4 Prayer requests

Like the downplay, requests for support, most commonly in the form of prayer (or good wishes, “good vibes”, etc.), presents the blogger as a fallible and vulnerable person on a site where they may otherwise be considered an expert or professional. The sample’s bloggers find that these supplications allow for interactions between them and their readers to extend beyond public discourses to personal conversations.

6.1.5 Irreverence and intertextuality

Apparent in some blogs and comments are speeches and practices that may be considered irreverent in some church and other religious settings. These include, for example, the use of light profanity (including the partial censorship of words, like “s**t”), the posting of images such as the famous “Buddy Christ” (from the movie *Dogma*), and discussions around the question “What would Jesus brew?”. Even tag labels may be irreverent, including, for example, the phrase “Theological Mumbo Jumbo” to tag posts and discussions on theological inquiry and doctrine.

These practices reflect some deep convictions held by some emerging church bloggers:

1. That those who are non-church, and anti-church, should be invited and made welcome to these online spaces.
2. That popular culture has much to say about Christian culture.

3. That piety and reverence do not equate to good Christian behaviour.
4. All Christians are imperfect.

Similarly, the intertextual play seen in the design and layout of some blog pages make visual the blog authors' intentions that people who do not understand, or are adverse to, pious Christian visual and literal text, are as welcome as everyone else to read and participate.

6.2 Creating an authentic emerging church blogosphere: building social trust

Like etiquette practices, the exchange of social trust is important for the establishment and maintenance of social trust within the blogging environment. As Lövheim and Linderman (2005) point out, environments that promote trust are likely to attract people to interact within them.

Social trust is given more than taken, however in some instances it is earned or assumed. For example, doctors and nurses have some social trust awarded them by patients in hospitals, by the very nature of their professions. The same is true for professors in universities and clergy in churches. In these environments patients, students and believers trust that these workers will provide the care, knowledge and confidence they seek as much as they trust the institutions that offered them their positions. In the blogosphere, authority rankings, such as those determined by Technorati, are an example of earned or assumed social trust. However, like a blogger's status as lay or ordained, the value of an authority ranking as an indicator of earned trust is up for debate in the emerging church blogosphere.

Nevertheless, bloggers exchange trust through comments and links. By this exchange, bloggers introduce themselves to other bloggers, introduce other blogs to the network of blog sites, acknowledge new audiences and endeavour to get to know them better. The following practices are promoted by bloggers:

1. Reading other blogs widely, and making it known to authors through comments.
2. Reading other blogs widely, and making it known to their own readers through hyperlinked references, encouraging them to follow the link.
3. Responding to all comments on each post, even if it's only to give small thanks.
4. Visiting the blog of a new commenter.
5. Introducing new blogs to readers.
6. Alerting readers to changes in their own blogging practice, such as taking breaks from blogging, or announcing a new series of posts on a given topic.

6.3 Nexus analysis

Scollon and Wong Scollon (2004: 25, 135) note that social action occurs at the intersection of three factors: the interaction order, the discourses in place, and the historical bodies of the participants involved. The authors give the name “nexus analysis” to the study of discourses at this intersection. The interaction order describes the structure of relationships between participants in the environment in which the interaction takes place. The discourses in place include not just communications between people in the interaction order, but other forms of text that exist in the environment. The historical body describes the set of assumptions, skills, values, beliefs and motivations that each participant brings to the setting of the social interaction. Each of these factors determines which discourses are valued or privileged within an interactive environment, and which are devalued or ignored.

Scollon and Wong Scollon argue that just as each of these factors impinges on the nature and design of the discourses at their intersection, they are likewise not constant. Thus there is a cycle of change as each factor interacts, which the writers name semiotic cycles. Nexus analysis, then, is the study of how each of these cycles informs and changes other cycles to aggregate change in the relationships of people in a setting of interaction, and nature of communication therein.

Applying the known data to Scollon and Wong Scollon's model, this researcher will analyse how blogs in the sample evolve and shape patterns of interaction. The analysis begins by identifying types of blogging practice as determined in part by bloggers' awareness of their audiences (interaction order), and in part by their individual motivations to present themselves in the blogosphere (historical body). Each type of blogging practice is then named. The researcher then considers what types of discourses are found on the blog page, around the posts and comments that constitute the main body of the blog site (discourses in place).

From a reading of posts for each blogger and from interview data, this researcher has identified four phases: autotelic, invested, networking and community. Naming them as phases may be somewhat misleading, as it connotes that those blogs in the fourth phase are more "evolved" than others. Yet this researcher chooses to call them phases as there is fluidity between them. It does not mean that those in the last phase were at one stage in previous phases, but it allows for the acknowledgement that some blogs are in transition between one phase and another.

The autotelic stage gets its name from Kris Cohen's study of blogging to imagined audiences (2006). Interview data reveals that a certain number of bloggers have been attracted to blogs as a way of developing or practising a writing style and regimen. In blogging they have seen a tool for writing that is much like a personal diary, yet in an exposed environment the challenge of writing for the interests of others is embraced. When writing, these bloggers may be aware of a number of people who read their site, yet the main motivation is for an imagined audience, and to publish written work for its own sake. Articles are posted in order to get a thought, story or opinion "out there". These articles are posted erratically if not seldom, and are self-contained (i.e. not serialised). Tags or categories may be used, if only for the use of the blogger him- or herself, to order entries as an archive. The discourses in place, such as blog titles and texts contained in side-bars, are personal, in that they are used to create a picture of the blogger. Such blogs include

Themerryrose, Jen's musings, No diggity, Random murmurings, Aropax® Nation and Exploring emerging embracing.

The invested phase is characterised mostly by the motivations of its bloggers. Unlike those in the autotelic phase, these bloggers' motivations are more than personal. They may write on professional experiences or reflections on theology and ministry practice (and do so during work hours), or show a desire to contribute to a set of particular conversations in the blogosphere. These bloggers may not receive as many comments, or have more strong connections, than bloggers in other phases, but may be aware of a greater audience through emails and other communications outside the blogosphere (such as after the Sunday morning sermon at church). Articles are posted with more regularity than those of autotelic bloggers, and some may be tagged according to different aspects of their life at work and home. The discourses in place may create a picture of the blogger or the blogger's profession, or of the online conversations and projects in which they are involved. Such blogs include *[hold :: this space]*, *Circle of pneuma*, *No guarantees*, *Planet telex* and *SmuloSpace*. *Mountain masala* is an example of a blog in transition between this phase and the previous one.

The third is the networking phase. In this phase the blogger is made aware of their site's readership by the regular commenting of a group of readers, and is motivated by this to post regularly. The writer is likely to more explicitly encourage comments and discussion, post articles on particular issues and themes, and either alert readers to upcoming hiatuses, or apologise for previous ones, in blog postings. The blog's design and its content would not only promote the blogger but his or her readership, including blog rolls, links to information about groups and organisations that he or she may be involved in. Both posts and surrounding text contains both personal and professional content, and there may be much "filter" information, i.e. lists of links to other places on the web of interest to the blogger and known readers. Bloggers are also likely to use devices to gain more information about their readership, such as the use of side-bar poll

programs and comment-based voting activities. Here some bloggers institute codes of conduct for commenters. *Eclectic itchings* and *Thegeoffre(y)port* exemplify this phase, while *Fernando's desk* is an example of a blog in transition from a previous phase.

The fourth is the community phase. Here blog posts provoke long strings of comments by regular known readers. The interaction order changes somewhat as commenters respond not just to blog posts, but to other comments. Bloggers are likely to compose moderation instructions, and enforce them in a variety of ways. User registration functions are likely to be in place. Posts are less likely to be personal in favour of discussion on public issues, and are more likely to be regular, and sometimes serial. Guest bloggers are a feature, for when the blogs' owner (or owners) wants to take a break, or introduce a new discussion topic that's best started by a known reader. The content of surrounding text and design feature less personal information and point to a symbol that represents also the group of readers. *Signposts*, and *The forgotten ways* are two most obvious members here. *Backyard missionary* is, in this researcher's opinion, in transition between this phase and the networking phase.

Blogs are likely to transition between one phase and another when the following properties change:

1. Bloggers change their frequency and regularity of posting articles
2. Bloggers become more or less aware of their readership
3. The number of comments in each post changes
4. The number of unique commenters to articles posted increases or decreases
5. Commenters begin to engage in their own conversations on a blogger's site

6.4 The emergence of emerging church identities

The sociocultural-linguistic theory of identity and interaction developed by Bucholtz and Hall (2005) is based on the premise that identity is not static, and ill-defined by social categories, but is

rather emergent, i.e. comes out of, and moves around, contexts of interaction. The formation of identity is the setting of oneself in relation to others. For Bucholtz and Hall, it is a discursive project, a system of naming connections to and disconnections from ourselves. In this system of relationality, three levels of naming are identified. The first is the level of text: naming beliefs and values that are in common with others, or are distinct from others. They may include shared stories and experiences. The second is the level of speaker, which is mainly identification of some common ground with other people. This may include the fact they are in similar spaces, or follow similar discursive practices. And the third is the level of structure: naming the sources of authority or institutions that create connections.

Applying this model to my survey of emerging church bloggers, this researcher has identified three levels of tension in their quest to discern a common religious identity. This research can only name them as tensions. Blogging interaction is not constrained by formalised membership process or adherence to any fixed set of principles or ethics. Bloggers bring diverse and unique experiences to the conversation, and listen to a variety of distinct and unequal voices from both within and without the study sample. What remain are assertions of comparisons and contrasts contained in reflections of religious experiences, conversations with readers and responses to other bloggers.

6.4.1 Orthodoxy-heresy tension

In the face of Christian institutional practices and doctrines, bloggers express a sense of marginalisation. Popular movies illustrate religious life more than a Sunday sermon or contemporary worship music. Conversations with prisoners, atheists, and those rejected by their congregations offer more inspiration for theological reflection than local church programs. So bloggers welcome the term heretic, describing one who embraces doubt when religious truths clash with apparent facts, and who rejects doctrine and piety that debilitate themselves and others from living faithfully.

Yet, when meeting religious pluralism and secular humanism, bloggers hear the call to assert some Christian fundamental beliefs. These include the story of the resurrection and the image of the Triune God. It appears not an project of evangelism, or of reasserting a Christianity within the culture of bloggers' experience, but more an endeavour to locate a common point of difference from other faiths, from which solidarity may be sought. For bloggers orthodoxy is based on an understanding of the Christian witness at the emergence of the first century apostolic writings, a period recalled (whether factually or mythically) as pluralistic in culture and religion, where Roman values clashed with Judaic nostalgia and bureaucracy, and where Christianity was subversive and counter-cultural. Parallels between this period and the entrance of postmodernism in contemporary culture are acknowledged.

6.4.2 Inclusion-exclusion tension

"If you come, you're in" appears to be a popular emerging church axiom. There appears no condition of entry into the conversation, no ritual or marker by which one can claim membership in the group. A similar impression may be drawn from the sample of bloggers. In interaction with commenters, bloggers welcome responses from and conversations with non-Christians and anti-Christians, and are reluctant to filter comments from spammers and flammers. In cross-blog associations, bloggers are opposed to using symbolic objects that connect them with a definable group (e.g. "friend of emergent" logos), and are reluctant to adopt the term "emerging church" in self-description (though some like the term "missional"). The network of links made between bloggers shows the sample is more a collection of small groups, based on conversations about particular ideas, or offline connections, than a cohesive group. So while tags and searches may identify their sites as emerging church blogs, bloggers generally consider themselves on the edge, or outside, of any sense of emerging church community, or reject the notion that there is one. It is easier for bloggers to set themselves against certain descriptions of religious identity than alongside them. They are not "churched". They are not "mega-church". Yet even these notions

are up for debate. Some bloggers attend Hillsong events, and some talk favourably of traditional congregation-based ministry. And while they talk of themselves as sometimes feeling on the margins of institutional religion, many are actively involved in their congregations, and even employed by them. Talk of being “on the outer” must be tempered by the fact in many ways they are “inside”. Nevertheless, or maybe therefore, blogging allows members of the sample to present an identity that sits within a fluid and expanding network of connections, in the establishment and in the world of exiled Christians, rather than a static group. Bloggers are able to “remain on the edge” of discursive endeavours to define and locate them.

6.4.3 The tension of words

Bloggers show they are not reluctant to discredit authority rankings as determined by Technorati on the basis that certain people are left out of the conversation. Why, then, are males and professionals in religious settings more likely to receive links from other bloggers in the sample? A clue to answering this question lies in bloggers' assertions as to what makes for good blogging. Bloggers value writing that is original, well-referenced and reasoned. Bloggers also believe that good blogging is based on being well-read, exposing oneself to a range of information both in the blogosphere and elsewhere.

Members of the sample have used the blogosphere as a space to reassess terms such as liberal, postmodern, Baptist, emerging, evangelical, traditional, Protestant and missional. In this space, bloggers endeavour to remove themselves from the institutional structures that define these terms and create borders and distinctions. Bloggers do share, however, a certain level of formal education, and have access to academic resources that allow them to engage in theological discourse. Writing is highly valued among the bloggers in the sample, and the opinions of many are drawn from the same range of published works. Bloggers point to a library of books from which an emerging church theology and missiology may be sourced.

Bloggers are keenly aware that academic discourse excludes voices from the emerging church conversation, and that those bloggers who can engage in it are given greater authority than others. They try to bring other forms of information to attention of readers, such as other websites, music and art, and the sites of less-known bloggers. Yet, since it's easier to produce words than other media in a blog, the blogosphere tends to favour writing. Bloggers that are considered good writers are by-and-large given more attention, and those that can offer well-versed criticisms of other writings can attract comments and links. Therefore, those bloggers that approach topics of public conversation, such as theology, church structure and authority, are more likely to receive attention and be referenced in other sources than those who write mainly on personal and private discourses, such as individual faith practices. Those bloggers that present other forms of media text, such as photography, are also less likely to be referred by others.

For bloggers in the sample, religious identity is not fixed, but emerges out of tensions that are exposed and played out in interaction with commenters and through hyperlink-based networks with other bloggers. Bloggers find their place, not in the resolution of the tensions, but in the act of identifying and engaging them.

6.5 The identity project of the emerging church blogger: four paradoxes

By way of summarising findings, this researcher proposes that the endeavour of developing an emerging church identity in the blogosphere involves the negotiation of four apparent paradoxes:

1. The paradox of being both online and missional, which this researcher calls the Cyborg paradox.
2. The presentation of self, the formation of bonds and the perception of community in an environment that favours networks, called the network paradox.

3. The endeavour of being inclusive in a medium that is not considered egalitarian, called the authority paradox.
4. The creation of bonds in a global medium, called the “glocal” paradox.

6.5.1 The Cyborg paradox

Emerging church bloggers who have participated in interviews have offered a glimpse of their lives on, beyond and with the screen. For some, especially those under the age of thirty, the blog has been a tool to consolidate thoughts and feelings about faith. Ideas and emotions make sense to them when they post it online, like writing in a diary or thinking out loud. These bloggers report that connecting to others online through their sites happened accidentally, organically, when an unknown readership appears in comments. Within a small time frame, their blogging evolved from a private enterprise to a humble introduction to strangers and acquaintances who make surprise visits to their site.

For these bloggers the Internet has become an extension of the mind, an online information store that potentially becomes a collective memory for the community of readers. Bloggers construct an image of themselves on their sites, which develops with each posted memory and interacts with other online identities.

For others, interactions with commenters and fellow bloggers are so significant that the blogosphere is considered an extension of their workplace, their religious community, and their circle of friends. Bloggers identify themselves as belonging to groups whose members they have never met face-to-face. Alternatively, friendships made offline in random or sparse and irregular meetings are maintained in the blogosphere.

The interviews have revealed that use of the Internet varies widely between bloggers, depending on their access to a connected computer, and the time they have at their disposal to “be online”. But for many the computer is a devoted companion. Bloggers are connected both at home and at

work. Owning a laptop computer with satellite broadband or Wi-Fi is the greatest pleasure, being online in the lounge room with the television, catching public transport or at the dinner table.

Interviewees have reported that not only they have made the Internet readily available to them, but how they have made themselves available online, responding as readily to communications on their computer, such as an email or IM alert, as they would in the world around their bodies and computers, like a ringing phone or knock at the door. The world behind the computer is just as present to them, generally speaking, as the world inside their office, classroom or dining room.

Religious bloggers present a challenge not only to how we view “being online”, but also to how we view “being religious”, as individuals and as communities, churches, and structured organisations. Consequently, religious bloggers offer us a new approach to understanding what it means to be human, that may be seen by traditional religious eyes as potentially revolutionary. Revolutionary, as it calls Christianity to account for the fact that its narratives and symbols are based in pastoral roots, and the doctrines that are formed are based on conceptions of humanity that are born from these symbols. The most contentious of these for the emerging church movement is the theme/meme of “incarnation”. Bloggers talk of the importance of missional community and practice that is informed by incarnational theology, i.e. a theology that values the spiritual aspect of human interaction in real time and space. But what does it mean to talk of belief in, and to behave in response to, incarnational theology in a place where bloggers do not take their bodies?

This researcher suggests that a response to this paradox involves a new perspective on the nature of the Cyborg. Emerging church bloggers in the sample reveal to this researcher that the identity of the religious Cyborg is not defined by his or her residence in Cyberspace, but in the place of Cyberspace among all other settings in which the Cyborg interacts and creates and maintains relationships. As these emerging church bloggers have shown to this researcher, Cyberspace is

not a place where the Cyborg goes to and returns from every once in a while, but exists permanently within his or her reach in everyday life.

For these Cyborgs, the virtual world of Cyberspace is not distinct from the real world, where real and virtual are clearly defined as offline and online, respectively. Instead, Cyberspace is one setting among all the others in a Cyborg's real life where interaction occurs. Cyberspace is as virtual as being in church, at work, driving along the highway, on the street, on the phone or in the supermarket. According to the Cyborg, none of these settings allow for the full construction and expression of a "real" identity, but virtual expressions of identities and relationships are discovered and cultivated in all of them. With this in mind, the construction of Cyborg identity is found not just in an online space, but in the flow between all spaces online and offline.

6.5.2 The network paradox

In order to fully explain the network paradox as negotiated by emerging church bloggers, this researcher considers how the same bloggers present themselves online, their attitudes toward the medium, and their attitudes about, and motivations for, forming relationships online.

Bloggers' self-presentation online

When cyber-culture studies migrated from popular magazines into more formal academic pursuits, heralded by Rheingold (1995) and Turkle (1996), a celebration of online identity as decentred, multiple and fragmented was the focus. Cyberspace allows for identity play, providing "a moratorium" for people to explore online how they'd like the offline selves to become, finding intimacy without responsibility in online relationships with others, letting imagination dictate how users create online worlds, rather than rules and restrictions (see Lövheim, 2005).

A decade or so later, as researchers move their focus away from email groups and MUDs towards social networking sites and blogs, writers such as Kennedy (2006) argue that questions about online identity should be explored in the context of the offline lives of Internet users. Hine

believes the question of identity must be considered within the context of meaning. Internet users create an online presence as it fulfils a need or a desire, prepares the user for the ongoing search for, or construction of, something of significance for the user, such as a meaningful connection to others, or a satisfying contribution to an online discussion or project. The fruits of these pursuits are not only for life online, but are seen to have benefits for the whole of the user's life, both on screen and on the street (Hine, 2000: 144).

Despite having the freedom to create any impression of themselves their imagination allows, it appears in the data that bloggers in the sample would like viewers of their sites to see them as they would see them in the "real" world, and portray an image of themselves that coheres with their understanding of themselves as religious people. These bloggers differ in the amount and type of information about themselves they offer. Some post photographs of themselves and family members online, some list the books they're currently reading or CDs they're listening to, some offer email addresses and office phone numbers for contact outside the blog. Most endeavour to portray interests beyond emerging church, such as music, cooking, film, and comic books. Few shy away from telling stories about their personal lives, relationships, work and study. The online identity of any blogger is known not just in the text that appears in each post, but in the whole site's design, including colour schemes, graphics used in the header, footer and sidebars. Hyperlinks, often ordered as lists in sidebars, also offer information about the blogger, by displaying the online world in which the blogger lives.

Some emerging church bloggers in the sample are church workers, and their sites are sponsored and supported by their churches. Yet interviews with these bloggers have revealed that the creation and maintenance of a professional identity online, while an important aspect, is not an issue of concern for them. They are willing to portray a personal side that would conflict with audience's expectations of their role, even risk retribution, if it fosters greater personal connection with their audience.

Roger Silverstone, as cited by Orgad (2007: 36), argues that identity play is facilitated by online communication where, though apparent distance is dissolved in cyberspace, “proper distance” is vast and insuperable. Proper distance refers to “proximity required in our mediated interrelationships if we are to create and sustain a sense of the other sufficient not just for reciprocity but for a duty of care, obligation and responsibility, as well as understanding”. For Silverstone, proper distance is maintained online, to the point that users can create multiple, fragmented and incoherent identities without affecting relationships with others. For example, a blog reader can post comments under many usernames, fooling all other readers that more than one person shares the same opinion of the original username. Participants in online communities are safe to play with their own identity, act out of character, misbehave, take on completely new characters, by the fact that no one can see them. For Silverstone, members of offline communities feel safe to share authentic or fake identities based on the knowledge that the repercussions on other facets of their lives, both online and offline, will be minimal.

A community of people to connect with online is important to emerging church bloggers, yet for most bloggers virtual community is less valued than offline community. Bloggers most often seek connections with others online in order to prepare for or strengthen connections in other ways, especially face-to-face interaction. The network study provided in the previous chapter has shown that offline connections already have a large impact on the strength of online connections. The community made through their blogs is considered significant not just for life online, but for present and future connections in other aspects of life. Thus emerging church bloggers actively endeavour to reduce “proper distance” in a variety of ways, including establishing and maintaining rules of conduct, and discouraging anonymity, in comments and discussion threads, and maintaining regularity in blog posts.

Silverstone laments that despite the language of hospitality attributed to the Internet (such as homepage, address, visitor), sites ironically lack “a meaningful host, one who takes responsibility

for the welcome” (Orgad, 2007: 38). This is not the case for participants in my survey. Emerging church bloggers create homes online where viewers are encouraged to engage meaningfully in their quest for spiritual growth. Emerging church bloggers seek connections online that will support and nurture their, often infant, communities outside the Web, and so the identities they construct online will also be congruent with their offline lives, in the search for a way of living authentically in between the screen and the street.

Bloggers’ attitudes toward the medium

How bloggers conduct themselves online, how they construct their online religious identities, is significantly informed by the values they attribute to the Internet. The Internet is not a mission field to them. These bloggers are not out to save souls, or even persuade Christians to join the emerging church movement. As self-professed outsiders in the traditional churches they have lived and worked in, they are looking for like-minded people who will help them grow in faith. Rather than “looking for the lost”, cyberspace is a place where they themselves can be “saved”, or at least find something meaningful on the margins of traditional church culture.

The data show that bloggers enter Cyberspace with both a sense of awe and a sense of purpose. With reverence to the vastness that is the world they have yet to discover and thanks for every new encounter with it, emerging church bloggers accept that what they know about God, the world and their place in it is “byte”-sized compared to the terabytes of knowledge awaiting their discovery. They embrace that their grasp of the world is only a small construction, fragile to erosion and transformation by the flow of information. For these bloggers, truth is a concept that is still seeking grounding, and cannot be pinned down by doctrine or institutional authority. If truth is a mountain, then the Internet will show you an infinite number of paths to its peak, and will present them all as equally valid, depending on where you’re coming from.

These emerging church bloggers enter the blogosphere with a view to meet the “other” with a willingness to let that encounter change their worldview, even if only a little. Denominational ties only highlight how “static” modern religious identity is. Emerging church bloggers choose fluidity over stasis, and being on the margins of religion rather than building a new centre for it.

This even makes the term “emerging church blogger” a problem they must negotiate in forming their online presence. Some emerging church bloggers discuss online and have mentioned in interviews that the movement/conversation has a tangible Australian character, in its focus on missional theology and praxis is evident in this country, distinct from the progressive theology of the movement in the US or the “alt.worship” movement of the UK. This assertion receives no consensus by all bloggers in the sample. Nevertheless, despite whether or not there may be a “down-under” flavour emerging in the movement, by no means is there any intention to bring about a formalised organisation that would consider itself the Australian emerging church. While many point to Forge as the Australian counterpart to emergent.com in the USA, many others (including Forge’s own members) consider FORGE to be simply a training network, a connection of like-minded people for the ongoing development of church leadership and mission, and consists of participants who both do and do not identify with terms such as emerging church or emergent.

Emerging church bloggers refuse any definition of what the emerging church is. It is at once a movement and a reaction to the movement, a conversation and a practice, a community and a collection of unconnected global diasporas, a new form of organised religion, a rejection thereof, a reclamation of ancient religion, and a redefinition of the word “religion”. One message comes through: as the emerging church seeks to define itself it ceases to be emerging; it joins the fray of traditions vying for relevance in a world where Christianity is regarded as generally irrelevant. So bloggers maintain a marginal identity, open to challenge and doubt, and actively valuing the beauty of being fledgling and uncertain.

The network paradox then is manifest by bloggers' intentions to create bonds with readers and other bloggers involved in the emerging church conversation, while at the same time reluctant to carry the label "emerging church", choosing instead to be seen as somewhere on the margins of the network.

6.5.3 The authority paradox

While bloggers seek to create an open parliament on the authenticity of religious symbols, doctrines and practices, they recognise that the blogosphere is not an egalitarian place.

Motivated by practical ethics informed by both religious values and values attributed to being online, some bloggers actively engage in practices to reduce the power of Technorati's rankings, in order to promote the contributions of low-ranked bloggers in the emerging church conversation.

Given the number of bloggers who have had some academic training, in either secular or religious institutions like seminaries and theological schools, and the number of bloggers who enjoy reading and promoting the published works that they have acquired, "good blogging" is widely interpreted as "good writing". Therefore bloggers in the sample that write often and well (i.e. address public issues regarding religion, offered reasoned critiques on the work of others, produce original work and remember to refer to other sources of information) are more likely to receive the attention of other bloggers in the sample, be linked to their sites, and generate a Technorati ranking. Thus the authority paradox is that bloggers feel ethically driven to counter the authority ranking that they have helped establish.

Women, in particular, are less likely to be among the high-ranked blogs, both within the sample and among bloggers in general, according to literature review presented earlier. While the emerging church appears affirming of women standing alongside men in ministry, leadership and decision-making roles, the blogosphere appears to favour the words of men in links and comments. A number of reasons could explain this phenomenon:

1. Women in the sample tend to blog infrequently compared to men, and are thus more likely to have blogs in the first autotelic phase
2. Both within and outside the sample, given there are fewer women in full-time professions in the church, there are fewer women who would have time to sit in an office and blog
3. Women, both within and outside the sample, by-and-large tend to blog less about public religious issues and more about private religious practice (e.g. more about the practice of reading of books or watching movies and less about critiquing the issues presented in such works).

The authority paradox is exacerbated by the displacement of women in the blogosphere, and in the perpetuation of a religious practice that contradicts the religious ideology of the emerging church.

6.5.4 The “glocal” paradox

In contrast to the mega-church model, the emerging church values small intimate communities of faith, where successful community ministry is more about enabling people to openly share stories and experiences, and engage in local mission, rather than attracting large audiences to religious events. In this respect, the emerging church blogosphere is in itself a paradox, as it is removed from anything considered “local”.

The influence of emerging church voices in other parts of the English-speaking world (particularly USA, UK, NZ, Canada) is recognised in this country, and that Australian emerging church bloggers interact with overseas bloggers as much and as readily as they do with their compatriots. This researcher suggests that the pursuit of some bloggers to present an Australian “flavour” or “unique focus” (as mentioned above) is in reaction to perceived endeavours to create a global movement or identity that may be defined by people or organisations overseas. Yet this pursuit is also rejected by other bloggers in the sample.

“Glocalisation” is a response to the tensions between local, national and global discourses. Being “glocal” is the negotiation of the problem proposed in previous sections: how is incarnational theology and mission to be discussed, affirmed and made central to a movement in a forum where people are disembodied? Being “glocal” means sharing one’s experiences of religion in a local context with others in a setting without borders. It is a reaction to both nationalisation and globalisation, and a rebellion against the traditional denominational structures in which the modern church operates. Being “glocal” invites people from around the world to join in a local mission, rather than forming a global organisation.

Indeed, emerging church bloggers are aware of the danger of, to quote Giddens, a “disembedding” of religious identity out of local context by the movement’s reliance on Cyberspace (see Giddens, 1991). The goal of the emerging church blogger is more than to contribute to the conversations in the blogosphere, but to offer learning from those experiences for use in the offline world.

7.0 Conclusion

Australian emerging church bloggers are a phenomenon that resides at the nexus of a number of social, political, historical and religious factors. Late modern Australian society, like other places in the Western world, has seen endeavours to remove Christianity from public life in the interests of liberal pluralism, only to see it return in the wars between “left” and “right” politics. Meanwhile, ecumenism and religious pluralism has led to a decline in denominational identity, and the rise of the “me-centred” network has replaced the local religious community as the main setting for the exploration of religious identity.

The Internet is a tool for expanding and strengthening me-centred networks, and promises a setting for an open parliament on the authority of Christian churches, and the value of Christian symbols and practices in the development of authentic Christian expression. Yet the Internet is laden with its own values and cultures that impact on how connections between users are formed, and therefore how online identities emerge. The blogosphere, like other sites in Web 2.0, is characterised by rhetorical values that attract people to participate within it. The reality of online relationships and discourse in the blogosphere may not reflect the promises made.

Thus, as explored in the Literature review, this research provides a potentially significant case study for examining the role of the Internet in the negotiation of religious identity within a changing religious sociology.

In this thesis’ introductory chapter, the question is asked:

How do those involved in the emerging church conversation use blogging technology to construct individual and communal online religious identities?

The researcher began the endeavour to address the question by stating a few premises based on a review of available and relevant literature: that identity is not static, but emerges from

interaction between people in social settings; that social settings are characterised by symbols and practices that people read as etiquette and the exchange of social trust, in order to determine how to present themselves in the setting; and that social settings are marked by discourses and patterns of interaction that are fluid.

From a reading of posts and comments by bloggers in a certain sample period, a network study of connections between bloggers (through comments and hyperlinked references) and a reading of data collected by interviews with some bloggers, this researcher has approached questions of identity, reflexivity and connection (as outlined in the Methodology) and has found the following:

1. That emerging church identity emerges from the exploration of practical and theological issues through the negotiation of three discursive tensions: that of orthodoxy and heresy; the endeavour to be inclusive and the motivation to exercise control; and the endeavour to create an egalitarian space while favouring a certain medium of expression.
2. That emerging church identity also emerges from a set of values held about the blogosphere and the place of bloggers within it.
3. That the relationships between bloggers and their audiences have an impact not just on conversations between participants, but on the shape of the interactive setting. Blog sites evolve with fluidity, through what has been identified as four phases.

Blogging is used by those in the emerging church conversation to construct religious identity by:

1. Creating spaces for open dialogue and critique on church doctrine, religious symbols and practices, leadership and authority in the church, and to consider alternatives.
2. Forming bonds with their audiences and with other bloggers.
3. Establishing codes and practices that allow for authentic discourse, both for commenters and for themselves and other bloggers.

Secondary questions are also listed in the Introduction and Literature review, which are now addressed. For the bloggers in the sample of study, the Internet is valued as a space for freedom of expression, a place where symbolic delineations between sacred and secular dissolve. Yet these bloggers approach Cyberspace not as a new world to be missionaries to. Rather it is a place where they can confess they are in need of support, a place where they can confess they are feeling on the margins of Christian society, or are feeling heretical. It is a place where public and private discourses are shared in the same spaces; the risk of setting professional and personal identities alongside each other is taken for the sake of finding (or making) “safe places” for authentic expression. So bloggers in the sample endeavour to reduce proper distance in order to foster authenticity in self-presentation and conversations with others.

Bloggers enjoy the opportunity to form connections with people above the constraints of distance, and the freedom to speak freely and openly about issues of public religion and personal faith. They are, however, aware that the blogosphere is not an egalitarian space. Systems of authority exist online and impact on how people are seen online and make relationships. They assert that high authority rankings do not equate to good blogging, and engage in practices that thwart the power of such systems. They are aware though, that “good blogging” is the domain of a certain set of people: educated, professional, and even male. They are ethically motivated to make the blogosphere more inclusive, even though their own blogging practice can exclude people from the conversation.

So bloggers have experienced the failure of Web 2.0 to live up to its hype. The rhetoric of Web 2.0 involves the democratisation of voices within the blogosphere, the dissolving of boundaries of private and public discourse that have excluded people (women, in particular) from participation in public life, and the ability for all users of text to become producers of text. The reality is that structures of authority exist in Web 2.0 that favour public discourse and good journalistic or academic writing, thus excluding many from full participation in religious discourse online.

The blogosphere, then, cannot speak for the entire emerging church. Bloggers claim that no blogger, and no group of bloggers, can represent the emerging church. Instead, they highlight the diversity of expression that exists and that the emerging church may only survive as a conversation or a movement. Once it is established it is no longer emerging. Bloggers are, then, content to remain as a node in the network of relationships, part of the flow of information. Bloggers are more satisfied in providing support and resources to people's own work in local contexts than contributing to a global enterprise.

The Australian emerging church blogosphere represents an ongoing change across the religious landscape of the continent. As "me-centred networks" rise, and ecumenism gives way to the polarisation of conservative and progressive voices in the public sphere, the power of denominations to frame one's religious identity is waning. Instead, involvement in religious movements, or conversations, that connect people to networks of ideas and people, will have a greater role in the way people talk about their connection to religion. The Internet cannot claim to have started this phenomenon, but can be said to contribute to it.

These conclusions lead the researcher to reflect on the construction of the religious Cyborg that has been a point of study for those involved in the research of religion online. This case study of Australian emerging church bloggers supports the following four claims, which the researcher proposes as new contributions to the field of research into online religion.

1. The project of identity construction of the religious Cyborg is not just found in his or her residence in Cyberspace, but in the journeys to and from all spaces both offline and online. Thus communications and relationships in Cyberspace should not be studied in isolation.
2. Cyborg theology challenges discursive borders between the offline world and Cyberspace as "real" and "virtual". Cyborg theology sees all spaces as virtual, as insufficient settings for authentic interaction and expression of identity.

3. The diminishing power of religious institutions to speak for religious people, and therefore to be points of reference for religious identity, gives way to the rise in such power of networks, both online and offline. Public religion in late modernity is marked by the fall of denominational Christianity. These institutions are becoming, among others, mere nodes in the networks of interactions that individuals use to construct their own religious identity.
4. The Internet does not shape how people construct religious identities as much anymore than the other way around. People express their identities by the way they shape the Internet. Those interested in the “fourth wave” of researching religion online should look to the Internet not just as a haven of peculiar religious practices, or as a meeting point for discrete online communities, but as changing and evolving social setting for the ongoing debate and dialogue on the place religion in all aspects of life, online and offline.

The Literature review explained that the history of research into online research has been viewed as a progression between three waves. The first wave of religion online focussed on phenomenological approaches to religion online. It concerned itself with seeking out what new religions are being born online, and how old religions are being reworked and shaped to fit online environments. It sought to understand the religious experiences that people found online, and asked why people went there.

The second wave focussed more on a cultural studies approach to religion online. It sought out to determine the received meanings of religious symbols being used, the rituals practised, and the structures of relationships established in virtual environments. The third wave was concerned with how these religious practices and symbols found their way into offline religious communities and individual lives.

Future research into religion online must address the limitations of these waves as created by a changing technology and an increasing variety of uses in daily living. In particular, a new wave

should respond to the new assertions that nobody “goes online” any more – that real and virtual worlds are integrated in everyday communications, and that the distinction between producers and consumers of religious text is now being blurred.

To summarise, previous research has constructed the religious Cyborg as either producers who make online religious text for consumption and host discrete online religious communities, or as consumers who read and respond appropriately to such texts in order to be considered guests in these Cyberspaces. This case study suggests that in the “fourth wave” of researching religion online, the religious Cyborg should be seen more as one whose daily living is characterised by the constant flow between two types of space, allowing the virtual world to continually break into the real world and at the same time bringing the supplications of the real world into the virtual.

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