Seeking the Sacred Online: Internet and the Individualization of Religious Life in Quebec

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Abstract: Research I am conducting with colleagues on religion in Quebec today shows three main types of Internet use for religious purposes: (1) for building and maintaining contacts with other congregations and individuals within the same religious orientation on local and international levels; (2) for governance of religious groups at a distance; (3) accessing spiritual/religious resources (prayers, sermons, rituals). This technology can be used to reinforce transnational religious governance. At the same time, it contributes to the individualization of religious life. I suggest that the findings of our team shed new light on religious individualization; that is, rather than implying superficial religiosity per se, individualization involves agency and self-responsibility for religious actors.

Keywords: Internet, religion, sociality, religious individualization

Résumé : Selon nos recherches et celles de nos collègues sur la religion au Québec aujourd'hui, l'Internet sert à trois objectifs principaux : 1) construire et maintenir des contacts avec d'autres congrégations et individus dans le même courant religieux, que ce soit au niveau local ou bien au niveau international; 2) assurer la gouvernance des groupes religieux à distance; 3) pour accéder à des ressources spirituelles religieuses (prières, sermons, rituels). Nous trouvons que cette technologie peut servir à renforcer la gouvernance transnationale religieuse; d'autre part, il contribue à l'individualisation de la vie religieuse. Nous considérons que les résultats de recherche que nous présentons ici jettent une nouvelle lumière sur l'individualisation religieuse; plutôt que de signifier une religiosité nécessairement superficielle, cette individualisation entraîne l'agentivité et la responsabilité pour soi des acteurs religieux.

Mots-clés : Internet, religion, socialité, individualisation du religieux

Introduction

The impact of the Internet on social relations is the subject of much conjecture and debate in the popular press and has attracted the attention of a considerable number of scholars (for example Bakardjieva 2005; Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002). A good deal of attention has been given to the issue of whether the Internet decreases face-to-face social interaction (Nie and Hillygus 2002), weakens or strengthens community ties (Matei and Ball-Rokeach 2001; Wellman et al. 2001), and whether it reinforces or subverts authoritarian political regimes (Kalathil and Boas 2003). Here I address somewhat similar questions in regard to the religious domain: for example, how does use of the Internet reinforce or weaken social ties within religious groups? How does the Internet threaten or reinforce religious authority? In short, how does the Internet shape religious sociality? These questions are framed within the larger issue of what a number of scholars have termed the "individualization" of contemporary religious life.

As Sade-Beck (2004) has noted, the Internet integrates personal and mass media and provides the user with a new sort of topography, "a rapid, new, immediate, multi-layered world," (46) one that is available 24 hours a day. What this new world means for life in the physical world—often referred to, perhaps erroneously, as the "real world," as opposed to a virtual one—is not entirely clear. A number of psychological studies associate heavy Internet use with loneliness (for example Amichai-Hamburger and Ben-Artzi 2003; Morahan-Martin and Schumacher 2003); however, in a review of the psychological literature, Bargh and McKenna conclude that, despite mass media stereotypes, "the Internet does not make its users depressed or lonely and it does not seem to be a threat to community life—quite the opposite, in fact" (2004:319). Political scientists Nie and Hillygus (2002) emphasize that time is not elastic and that indeed, Internet use does take away from time spent with family and

friends; however, its effects on relationships appear to vary depending on the time and place of use. Sociability and community involvement are not *created* by the Internet, according to a review of sociological research on the subject, although existing tendencies are likely to be reinforced by it (DiMaggio et al. 2001). Several anthropological studies examine new forms of sociability generated by the Internet (McLard and Anderson 2008; Wilson and Peterson 2002) especially as regards intimate relationships (Johnson-Hanks 2007; Nisbett 2006; Padilla et al. 2007). To a large degree, the findings on religious use of the Internet that I present here confirm these more widespread tendencies. At the same time, I suggest, they shed new light on questions that concern students of religion, namely the individualization of religion and emerging forms of religious sociality. Results from the ongoing team research I direct on contemporary religious groups in Quebec, along with work done by others, show that these new forms of religious sociality are partly fuelled by new information technologies. Different types of religious groups and religious actors use new technologies (Internet, chat rooms, DVDs, email, websites) in different ways, for different objectives and with varying degrees of reflexivity.

Our team's research has found three main types of Internet use for religious purposes: (1) for building and maintaining contacts with other congregations and individuals within the same religious orientation on local and international levels; (2) for governance of religious groups at a distance; (3) for religious learning and training; and (4) for accessing spiritual/religious resources (prayers, sermons, rituals). To illustrate each of these, I will use one or several examples from the team study or from independent research by team participants. Our team research shows that Internet technology can be used to reinforce transnational religious governance. At the same time, it contributes to the individualization of religious life by giving actors direct access to a wider range of religious information and resources than is available in their immediate environment, as well as a wider choice of authorities to consult. I suggest that our findings shed new light on religious individualization; that is, rather than implying superficial religiosity per se, individualization involves agency and self-responsibility for religious actors. This, I argue, is the case for those who seek resources on the Internet so as to keep their spiritual lives and religious practice vibrant, authentic, and in some cases, orthodox. Moreover, by supporting religious agency, the Internet is also giving rise to new forms of religious communalization.

The Research

Most of the examples I present of how the Internet is used for religious ends are taken either from a broad ethnographic study[1] that I am directing on religious diversity in Quebec as it has developed since the 1960s or from independent research done by participants in the team study. The research, still in progress, is oriented to documenting the new religious diversity that has developed in the province. Our second objective is to explore the meaning of religion (spirituality) for those who frequent the groups our team studied in this modern, secular society.

Since 2006, we[2] have carried out observations with groups representing (1) religions established in Quebec since the 1960s (for example Neoshamanism, Druidism, Wicca); (2) new forms of religious practice in long-established religions (for example a Jewish "Reconstructionist" synagogue and various Catholic charismatic groups); and (3) religions imported by immigrants (for example Islam, Hinduism, certain forms of Buddhism). The study also includes congregations of religions long established in Quebec that include a substantial proportion of immigrants among their members (for example a Laotian Catholic congregation). Thus far, observations have been completed on a total of 90 groups; of these, 30 have been studied in depth for six months or more. In the first phase of the project (2006-2010) most of the data, including most of the cases mentioned herein, were gathered in the Montreal area. In the current phase of the project (2010-2014) similar studies are also being carried out in various other regions of Quebec as well as in Montreal; some 20 groups are currently the object of extended observation while about 40 more are being documented in short-term studies.

The research methodology is strongly influenced by approaches termed variously as "phenomenological," "experiential," or "experience-near" (Wikan 1991). This broad current includes McGuire (2008), Csordas (2001, 2002), Desjarlais (1992), Goulet (1993, 1998), Turner (1992, 1994, 1996) Dubisch (2005, 2008) and many others. Our research tools give an important place to the voice of the actors, their subjectivity and embodied experience; that is, to the "complex and seemingly subjective evidence" required for *verstehen* (McGuire 2002:198). At the same time, we seek to limit the biases of such an approach by the use of standardized interview and observation formats (adjusted as needed for each group) and careful supervision of the work of assistants by several researchers. A detailed analytical grid covering a wide range of themes[3] guides the preparation of the final reports, which are abridged and evaluated by an outside specialist, as well as several of the researchers before publication.

Assistants observe religious rituals and other religious activities, such as neighbourhood prayer groups, as well as social activities involving members of the group such as communal meals and picnics, funding events and courses (language, dance, martial arts) sponsored by the congregation. They interview leaders and members who vary in terms of gender, age, profession, matrimonial status, and level of commitment to the group. Data has been and continues to be collected on members' personal religious practices, as well as those involving the group. Interviews focus on personal and religious trajectories, the role of the religious group in their everyday lives, the level of economic and ideological commitment to the community and, when relevant, religious activities related to other religions.[4] The observations and interviews necessary to complete the final reports require repeated attendance at religious rituals and many informal contacts with members; this usually takes at least five to six months of fieldwork, often longer. It should be noted that no particular effort was made to discover the uses of Internet in the fieldwork. Rather, it was through the research that we discovered how important this new technology has become for religious actors and groups.

Religion and the Internet

The effect of the Internet on religious behaviour is the subject of a growing new body of literature.[5] According to Larsen (2004:18), more Americans have consulted the Internet for religious reasons than for any other purpose, such as online dating, gambling or banking. New religious uses for the Internet abound, including online churches (Hutchings 2010), online rituals (Helland 2005) and virtual pilgrimages (MacWilliams 2002). At the same time, the Internet offers a forum of exchange and networking possibilities to opponents of particular sects and contested groups such as the Church of Scientology (Cowan 2004), as well as opportunities and support for individuals seeking to leave sects (Barker 2005). Similarly, work on disaffected Hassidic Jews in New York by Hella Winston (2006) and Sandrine Malarde's (2011) research on such Hassidim in Montreal, shows that the Internet is often a tool for transgressing community norms and in some cases, for leaving the group.

This last example illustrates the challenges that the Internet is likely to pose to established, local religious authority. This is true both of marginal groups, such as witches' covens (Dawson and Cowan 2004a), as well as more established churches. As Helland (2004) sees it:

> Although the Internet is in many ways a blessing to religious institutions that use it to their advantage, it can also be an official religion's worst nightmare. Like the

printing press, power has shifted through the development of a tool of mass communication. Doctrines and teachings that were once centralized and controlled can now be openly challenged, contradicted, or ignored through a medium that is accessed by hundreds of millions of people every day. [30]

Indeed, our research finds many examples whereby local religious authority is circumvented through recourse to online resources. However, as I explain further on, the Internet can also be used to strengthen established religious authority and extend it across national boundaries.

Though Internet technology places a wide array of religious resources at the disposal of individuals that cannot normally be monitored by religious institutions (except in the case of certain sects), one may well ask whether virtual religious sociality can replace offline religious groups and networks. After all, how much of the religious emotion or embodiment that are part of lived spirituality can be experienced via the Internet? In a study of Israeli support communities for the bereaved, Sade-Beck (2004) comments that:

> Online communication on the Internet facilitates the expression of emotions (output) and the input of emotional messages, thus developing and reinforcing important social ties between users, forming a system of relationships similar to ties of family and friendship, all taking place without participants being physically present. [46]

How true this might be for specifically religious experience; that is, contact with the sacred is less clear. The power of real-life shared ritual for creating religious contexts that engage the emotions of participants is amply documented (for example Mossière 2007). Dawson (2005) and O'Leary (2005), both cited by Hutchings (2010:348) express scepticism as to the potential of cyber rituals to substitute for those held in physical space, though Hutchings (354) mentions the case of a disabled woman who greatly appreciates such rituals. In the same vein, one may argue that online rituals may reach a public that otherwise might have no access to them. Here I am thinking of those with certain physical limitations, agoraphobics, along with those who would not normally enter a church, temple or other religious space, or who, because of physical distance, might not have access to the type of ritual that interests them. Moreover, Rosemary Roberts, a participant in the team project, describes how, after the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in April 2010, far-flung practitioners of Reclaiming Witchcraft mobilized via an email listserv for performing concerted healing magic and for sharing their feelings about the event:

The following day, after many had met "in the ether" the night before, brought a chorus of shared experiences from various points in the Eastern United States, with many reporting that they had seen visions of light moving in spiral formation, drawing the oil back down to the sea floor. Several expressed feeling lighter and more hopeful; many pledged to continue to keep vigil and raise healing energy for the Gulf and all the ecosystems affected by the oil spill. [Roberts in press:10]

As for embodiment, let us consider the question of pilgrimage, generally seen as an embodied form of religious practice, one that has found increasing popularity in many traditions across the world in recent years (Reader 2007). MacWilliams (2002) makes a strong case for the religious contributions of virtual pilgrimages:[6]

> First, they create a mythscape, a highly symbolic sacred geography, largely based upon oral or scriptural traditions. Second, they use interactive visual-auditory techniques to evoke experiences of divine presence. Third, they provide liminoid forms of entertainment for the traveler/viewer. Fourth, as a leisure activity done at home or office computers, virtual pilgrimages allow individuals to join online traveling communities, which they often describe using the discourse of *communitas*. [320]

Nevertheless, MacWilliams (2002) sees many differences between virtual pilgrimage and "the real thing," the former is instantaneous, figurative rather than literal; as he puts it, the pain experienced by the barefoot pilgrim cannot be simulated on the Internet, at least not yet (326).

The question of whether virtual practices can replace embodied ones is something of a non-issue for our present concerns. According to a broad survey by the Pew Religious Forum, "faith-related activity online is a *supplement* to, rather than a *substitute* for offline religious life" (Clark et al. 2004: ii, italics in the original). This is certainly the case in our team research, given that our focus was on actual, offline congregations and networks. Thus our research speaks to the question of how the Internet is shaping the sociality and governance of religious groups, and how individuals' use of the Internet may or may not contribute to the trend toward the individualization of religious life noted by a number of researchers working in various national contexts.

The Individualization of Religious Life

In an inversion of Durkheimian priorities, the emphasis in religion today—whether in the form of established religions or newer spiritualities—appears to be on the subjective experience of the sacred much more than on religious institutions themselves, a trend amply confirmed in our research. One sign of this is religious mobility, as it concerns change in individuals' religious behaviour as compared with their religious upbringing. For example, some 44 per cent of Americans have changed religious affiliation over the course of their lives according to a survey by the Pew Research Center (2008:22).[7] Our research finds that many immigrants have converted to Evangelical Protestant churches from Catholicism or animism; sometimes this happens in the home country before migration, sometimes after arrival in Canada. In the past, especially in the 1970s, Evangelical congregations have attracted a number of Quebecois born in the province and raised as Catholics. At present we are finding many recently established Evangelical churches in the Saguenay region that are attracting followers raised as Catholics, much like what happened in Montreal in the 1970s. Presently, in the town of Chicoutimi (in the Saguenay region), there are at least six such churches. Muslims appear to convert less often, though we have encountered a few such cases. However, many Muslims become much more active in their religious practice after migrating to Canada. Meanwhile, Islam is the religion that attracts the most converts in Quebec, particularly among women, typically non-practicing Catholics, in younger age cohorts.[8] Buddhism is in second place, attracting older individuals and, of these, men more often than women (Castel 2003).

Conversion, though, is but the tip of the iceberg as far as religious mobility is concerned. Much more frequent are changes of religion and changes within the same religion to different types of practice (for example, from Sunni to Sufi practice among Muslim migrants); among the Quebec-born we find many who have changed religious frequentations several times during their lives. Such individuals frequent groups of different traditions, often simultaneously, and develop personal spiritual syntheses involving symbols and practices from various traditions. The Spiritualists I have followed for over a decade often integrate neoshamanic practices (for example, sweat lodges) as well elements of Catholicism, for most the religion of primary socialization, into their spiritual repertoire. In the team research, we found many Catholic-raised Quebecois who circulate among other types of groups (Buddhist, Neoshamanic and Spiritualist, for example) without converting or changing religious identity. Though I have not analyzed the motivations behind this type of religious mobility in other cases, I have found that the born-Catholics who frequent the Spiritualist church I study (that is, most of the congregation), are not seeking a new religious identity (Meintel 2007) but rather are looking for what I call "tools for transcendence": that

is, for personal experience of a reality beyond the mundane that gives meaning to their everyday lives.

Religious bricolage (Gellner 1997), or individual syntheses of practices and beliefs from different traditions, is very common in our study. Indeed, we find a good many cases of parallel religious practice, that is, individuals who frequent different types of religious groups; for example the Spiritualists who still attend Catholic Mass on occasion (Meintel 2012) and the Latin American Catholics who go to Spanish-languages services in Catholic churches but also to those in Evangelical churches on occasion. We have found cases where, after frequenting another type of religious group, such as a Buddhist temple, a Spiritualist church, or an Umbanda group, individuals return to the regular practice of Catholicism. Some of those we met in religious groups are reluctant to identify with any particular denomination, whatever their actual practice. In fact, in previous research on non-religious themes, I found individuals who termed themselves as "having no religion," meaning not that they were atheist or even agnostic, but rather that they did not identify with any particular religious affiliation.

Most non-immigrant Quebecois who frequent a religious group—or several—on a regular basis, as well as some of those born elsewhere, prefer to speak of "spirituality" rather than religion, much as other researchers have found. The emphasis on religious subjectivity gives renewed importance to emotions in religion (Champion and Hervieu-Léger 1990; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Riis and Woodhead 2010) and along with this, embodiment (McGuire 2007; Dubisch 2005). For many, religious activities offer an occasion to recover a sense of unity between body mind and spirit that has been lost owing to what McGuire (2008) calls "secularization" of the body, health and health care. Not surprisingly, healing is a key element the religious rituals of many groups in Quebec.

In keeping with the tendency toward less institutionalized religious life, non-denominational congregations are multiplying in the United States (Baylor Institute for the Study of Religion 2006:8). Furthermore, a great many Americans—some 21 per cent of the population according to Fuller (2001:4)—are concerned with spiritual issues but are "unchurched." As per the title of his book, they are "spiritual but not religious." However, several caveats are in order. Though the Quebecois follow the broad tendency observed in many Western countries toward more individualized religious life, in many cases they are not, strictly speaking, "unchurched." That is, Quebecois who are in fact religiously active do not always equate their practice and ritual participation with denominational identity; rather, "religion" is seen as a matter of institutions and hierarchy and usually equated with the Catholic Church. They may in fact identify in some way as Catholic, yet actually practice with what they consider a "spiritual" group. This is the case with the great majority of those in the Spiritualist congregation I study. Those I have interviewed, including those serving the group as healers and mediums, often do not see themselves as "Spiritualists," rather when asked about their religion, will say something like, "well, I was raised Catholic."

The centrality of personal, lived experience in religion today (Hervieu-Léger 1999) often leads individuals to undertake a personal quest for meaningful practice, be it in the tradition of their birth or in other religious currents. For some scholars, the (relative) de-institutionalization of religious life is disquieting. In the past, Robert Bellah and his colleagues saw "radically individualistic" religion, as exemplified by "Sheilaism" (the name their informant, Sheila Larson, gave to her personal faith) as inherently fragile, in that its adherents are "deprived of a language genuinely able to mediate between self, society, the natural world and ultimate reality" (1985:237). The French sociologist Françoise Champion (1990) speaks of the "nebulous" syntheses between what she terms "mystical and esoteric" currents and elements of psychotherapy and uses the terms "self service" and "à la carte" (52) to describe the individual's personal spiritual syntheses. Elsewhere Champion (2003:179) remarks that "the way of believing today is particularly significant: one believes in an uncertain, undefined, relative way ... in the mode of 'why not?'" (my translation). In the same vein, Hervieu-Léger (1993:203) speaks of the "dislocation, pure and simple, from any memory that is not immediate and useful" (my translation). The implication is, for those who engage in spiritual bricolage and who do not identify exclusively with a single religious current, religiosity is likely to be rather flimsy and subject to a logic of pragmatic, short-term satisfaction.

Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby has used the term "à la carte" (1988, 1990, 2007-8) and "fragmented" (1987) to describe contemporary religion in Canada, and more specifically, in Quebec. Yet Bibby also notes the "pervasiveness" (2007-8) of Catholicism in Quebec, and the resilience of religious institutions across Canada; yet, intriguingly, he finds a surprising number of Canadians, the highest being in Quebec where 57 per cent of those interviewed feel they have experienced God's presence (2004: 149-150). This last is particularly interesting given that religious attendance in classical terms (for example Sunday Mass for Catholics) is lower in Quebec than elsewhere in the country (2007-8). I suggest that there may be a relation between these two observations—on the

one hand, apparent disaffiliation from institutionalized religion, as assessed in conventional terms, and on the other, personal experience of the sacred. I return to this question at a later point.

Transnational and Local Networks

Transnational networks are evident among very different types of religions in our study. Immigrant Evangelical congregations, for example, tend to have close contact with other congregations of the same religion in the country of origin and elsewhere; this is the case for certain Latin American congregations and for the *Communauté Évangélique de Pentecôte* (CEP), a Pentecostal church studied by Mossière (2007, 2010a). In this case, the Montreal congregation keeps in close touch with ten others that it sponsors in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The pastor posts his weekly sermons on the French-speaking Christian website Topchretien[9] and receives communications there from members all over the world. Moreover, the CEP has a development project in the DRC for which he draws funding and management skills from other Pentecostal congregations located in various parts of North America.

The female *murids* (members of an Islamic Sufi order based in Senegal) who Traoré (2010) studied in our project are in regular email contact with other murid groups and individuals across the world, particularly in New York, Spain and Paris, as well as with their sacred cities in Senegal, Pohokane and Touba.[10] News, messages and announcements are transmitted via an email list that keeps murids all over the world informed of religious activities. Muslims in Quebec also use the Internet for local networking, according to research by Haddad (2008); Cesari (2004) notes in Haddad that the Internet is both "instrument" and "environment," both a means of and a forum for communication among believers. He finds numerous Quebec-based Muslim websites, most of them bilingual (French/English) and, far from reducing real-life interaction between those who chat on certain sites, Haddad finds that the Internet facilitates it. Much like the case of the murid brotherhoods mentioned earlier, the Internet extends the purview of other Montreal Sufi groups into cyberspace, and helps members stay in touch, locally and transnationally; also, as in the case of the Montreal Sufi Institute,[11] it may bring in new members (Haddad 2008:205).

For those involved in more marginal spiritualities, the Internet allows contact with others of the same or similar orientation. Quebecois Druids, Wiccans, Pagans maintain close ties with networks that extend to the United States and, for Druids, to France. One such group is the Montreal group of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (Normandin 2010), a worldwide organization founded by anthropologist Michael J. Harner. The workshops held in the Montreal area by teachers trained by the Foundation are announced on the Foundation's website.[12]

In virtually all these nature-centred spiritualities, email contacts link at least some of the members with each other. In some cases, Facebook and electronic mailing lists are crucial for announcing rituals and other religious events; this is the case, for example, with Wiccans, Pagans, Druids, Reclaiming Witchcraft, "Native spirituality" groups and so on. There is considerable overlap among those who frequent rituals in these spiritual currents. The French-speaking Druids studied by Jourdain (2011) are developing a website; the Reclaiming movement in Montreal (a Wiccan group studied by Rosemary Roberts in our team project) has had a website for some time.[13] Some Spiritualist groups in Montreal have websites, including the church I study, and many of its members who also practice "Native spirituality" are on a mailing list managed by a man who is very active in the congregation. Emails inform recipients of sweat lodges, visits by Native North and South American shamans and other events of interest. Many larger groups (Catholic parishes, Protestant congregations, synagogues and mosques) also have websites that keep members informed of coming events. Druids and Wiccans tend to make greater use of interactive social media such as blogs and Facebook.

Anna Luisa Daigneault's (2011) first contact with the Anglophone Druids she studied in our project was via the Meetup[14] website, which allows like-minded individuals to find each other, organize and communicate about forthcoming events. Most of these Druids are under 35 years of age, and include a number of solitary practitioners of Paganism or Wicca who discovered these Druids and their rituals through Facebook or websites. For example, two male Pagans were practicing in solitude until they discovered each other through online profiles on a vampire website; now they attend Druid rituals. (These Druids often have a background in role-playing networks, such as "Dungeons and Dragons.") Similarly, Rosemary Roberts (2009, 2010) found young Wiccans who came to Wicca via the Internet (see also Berger and Ezzy 2004). Some of the Anglophone Druids are still involved in contemporary online gaming culture, but Druidic events are kept separate from fantasy-inspired online activities. While most participants Daigneault met were enthusiastic about new communication technologies, she observed some lively debates about the dangers of the Internet (for example too much government surveillance). Wiccans, for their part, also express some ambivalence to electronic media.

Though Adler (1997:4) speaks of technological advancement and modernity as "alienation" from the Pagan point of view, most of the Montreal Wiccans and Pagans Roberts (2010) interviewed, especially younger ones, are avid users of social media, websites and listservs for organizing their events.

Religious Governance and Authority

Though many of our findings show how the Internet expands the possibilities for individual religious agency, it is also clear from our findings that it can reinforce religious authority at a distance. For one of the groups in our study, an Umbanda[15] temple in Montreal where Annick Hernandez (2010) did fieldwork, the Internet is essential for day-to-day functioning and governance. The syncretic product of many influences, including African and Amerindian traditions, Spiritism, or Kardecism and Catholicism, Umbanda originated with Zélio Moraes (1891–1975), a Spiritist-influenced medium working in Niteroi, a city located near Rio de Janeiro. Bastide (1960) describes Umbanda as something of a reinvention of macumba via Spiritism (443) that retains African mystical associations between days, colours, *Orixás* (forces of nature), plants and animals (450).

A small Umbanda group of about a dozen members formed in Montreal some twenty years ago; they include a few mediums (three to five at any given time) who incorporate Brazilian spirits in a weekly public ritual, called a *gira*, where all singing is in Brazilian Portuguese. The mediums are highly educated and all but one or two of the members are of European or Quebecois origin. The mediums in the group did not discover Umbanda through Brazilian immigrants nor had they visited Brazil, except in the odd case as tourists, before becoming *umbandistas*. Rather, they encountered Umbanda via a complex process of transnationalization that began with a visit to Brazil by a few Swiss therapists. Isabelle, the coordinator of the Montreal group and a psychotherapist by occupation, became a member of the group that developed in Geneva. When she returned to Montreal in the early 1990s, she formed a group that, like the one in Geneva, became part of the "Arán Temple"[16] whose leader, or *pai de santo*, lives near São Paulo, Brazil.

Annick Hernandez, a participant in the team project, has had extensive contact with the Arán Temple in Montreal, first as a participant and later as a researcher/participant over two years. She has also made several visits to the Arán Temple in Brazil and has interviewed the representative of the Temple abroad, who happens to be the sister of the pai de santo. Hernandez has participated in three retreats in the São Paulo temple, and one

meeting where the coordinators of all the temples, abroad or inside Brazil, were invited. Besides ongoing participant observation in the Montreal temple, she carried out many informal interviews with Arán Temple mediums in Montreal, Brazil and elsewhere.

The notion of the Arán Temple as a single entity that is presently rooted in many different nation-states is more than an image; it is a guiding principle of its governance (Meintel and Hernandez in press.) The Internet is crucial for contact between "overseas temples" and the centre of the network in São Paulo. Information about events at the São Paulo temple, initiations of mediums into higher levels there, other rituals and social events are transmitted regularly from São Paulo to the other Arán temples by email. The São Paulo temple maintains several websites in Portuguese as well as one in English, French, and Portuguese that provides links to the sites of a number of the member temples. In this religion, ritual exactitude is paramount and deviations, unless agreed to by the leader, are not encouraged.[17] Isabelle sends a report on the gira to the leader of the temple in Brazil every week.

Internet contact also allows frequent lateral contact between temple groups, for example between certain overseas temples. Over time, for example, a close relationship has also developed with the Washington D.C. temple, due to its size, importance (unlike the Montreal group, this temple has a permanent ritual space), and relative proximity. If the overseas coordinator, affectionately called *mae* (mother) visits the Washington group, the Montrealers are informed and some may travel to see her there. However, the finances of each temple group are separate and autonomous.

The CEP studied by Géraldine Mossière in Montreal and in the DRC (2010a) also exerts transnational governance, but in this case, the line of authority runs from north to south. Since 2005, the congregation in Montreal has founded ten churches in the DRC, some of which are situated in the capital, Kinshasa, and the others in Kasai, the pastor's home province (Mossière 2010b). As part of the CEP's religious consortium, the congregations in the DRC are obliged to follow CEP guidelines for sermon content and liturgy and to file an annual report to the Montreal congregation regarding their development. The pastor in Montreal inculcates leaders of the DRC churches with the CEP's evangelical message and trains them in preaching techniques. These leaders are of diverse ethnic origins but are mostly from the pastor's own personal network from his days as a theology student. Material resources circulate constantly from Montreal to the CEP congregations in the DRC. For instance, Montreal's mother church may cover the

purchase of musical instruments or motorcycles for pastors in Africa, as well as computer equipment. The pastor founded a non-governmental organization in 1983, the Citadel of Hope, situated on land he owns. This organization hosts, among other things, a micro-credit program for widows and single mothers who are church members. Other projects include animal husbandry, sewing workshops for women and classes in adult literacy and family budgets (see Mossière 2010b).

Religious Learning and Socialization

The foregoing shows how the Internet can be used to strengthen religious authority and extend it across geographical distance. In other cases, this technology allows individuals to circumvent local-level religious authority and seek information on their own, rather than through clerical intermediaries. A broad American survey conducted by the Pew Forum found that 26 per cent of respondents had gone on the Internet to find information about a tradition other than their own; 28 per cent had used it to find out more about their own tradition; and 18 per cent had done so for both reasons (Clark et al. 2004:7).

Our research finds many instances where individuals seek information on the Internet about their own tradition, one they have recently adopted or one that they are considering adopting. For example, the leaders of the young Anglophone Druids studied by Daigneault (2011) had never met more experienced practitioners when they began to explore Druidry, so they sought training via the Internet on a site called "A Druid Fellowship" (ADF).[18] Such training, according to the site, normally takes about two years. Though the ADF sets down requirements as to readings and rituals that must be documented, there are no other controls over those who go through its training programmes. French-speaking Druids in the Montreal area, also studied in our project (Jourdain 2011), tend to be of a different milieu and generation; these Druids, unlike their younger Anglophone counterparts, make very limited use of Internet technology; in fact, the two groups only learned of each other's existence through our research assistants.[19]

Muslim converts, in particular, seem to make ample use of the Internet in order to learn more about their new faith and how to practice it, as well as to chat with other converts. It appears that the search for information on Islam is one of the early steps toward conversion to Islam for women in Quebec and in France (Mossière 2010a: 96). The female converts Mossière studied find "born" Muslims to be less than dependable as sources of information on their religion, and prefer to consult the Internet to learn about Muslim practices and norms of behaviour. Also, they prefer to seek information on the Internet so as to make their own choices between competing currents of Islam. Converts often join chat rooms to exchange with "sisters" and "brothers" in Islam; in some cases, virtual encounters lead to marriage. Though our research team did not encounter Jewish individuals who had consulted the Internet in the process of conversion, one can find a number of Internet resources oriented to potential converts to Judaism and to Catholicism, in French as well as in English.[20] Moreover, other sites are designed to provide Catholics and Jews with information about their faith and how to practice it.[21]

Online Ritual and Prayer Resources

Perhaps the clearest example of expanded possibilities of religious agency the Internet affords is the many ritual and prayer resources available online. For those who practice neoshamanic spiritualities, Wicca and Druidry, online spiritual resources are usually integral to spiritual practice. The new availability of such resources represents something of a challenge to the secrecy practiced in certain Druidic and Wiccan traditions, whereby arcane knowledge was transmitted via carefully guarded oral tradition. At the same time, as Cowan points out, "these spaces provide alternative, hitherto unavailable venues for the performance and instantiation of often marginalized religious identities" (2005: x).

Druid leaders often go online to find inspiration when planning rituals, as well as to announce these events to their network. Likewise, for the Pagans studied by Roberts, prayers, spells and rituals are constantly renewed, often with the help of Internet resources, to accommodate an evolving personal synthesis. For example, Monique, one of Roberts' informants, who was in her mid-thirties at the time of the interview explained how, as a child, she experienced premonitions, prophetic dreams and communication with angels. Later, after her father's death, she often heard him speaking to her. Internet research on spirits, ghosts and ancestral worship led her to contemporary witchcraft (Wicca and Paganism). She is currently involved in a coven that incorporates the diverse perspectives and interests of its members, including High Magic, Hindu, and Buddhist practices. Also drawn toward the Sacred Feminine, she decided to follow in the footsteps of her coven's High Priestess to become a priestess of the Fellowship of Isis, currently based at Conegal Castle, Ireland.[22] Monique is half-Haitian and most recently, has been cultivating her relationship with Vaudou entities (Roberts 2009:125-128). Such hybrid spiritualities are fairly typical of the Pagans and Wiccans interviewed by Roberts, and online research is a normal part of the constant search for new inspiration.

Mainstream religions are also using the Internet to offer new spiritual resources to their followers. For example, a Catholic congregation established in 2004 in the Plateau, a central-city Montreal neighbourhood, under the auspices of the Monastic and Lay Jerusalem Communities (Fraternités de Jérusalem) founded in Paris in 1975, offers a weekly homily that can be downloaded from its website or received by email. Like many Catholic parishes in the city, it also offers a weekly liturgical flyer on its website that can be used to follow the readings from the Mass at a distance.[23]

Internet and the Individualization of Religious Life

It is clear from our research findings that the Internet expands the possibilities of religious agency for individuals, making it easy for them to find new resources for personal spiritual practice, to connect with others of similar orientation, share religious matters, and learn more about a religious tradition that interests them. Moreover, religious resources have multiplied, thanks to the Internet, and new ones (virtual pilgrimages and online churches, for example) have emerged. For discovering a different tradition, or a different current within one's own, to leave a sectarian group, to convert to a different faith, or to acquire information that was once available only to a few, the Internet has proved itself a formidable tool.

Our research has also found that the Internet is a useful support for religious networks and congregations, extending their reach across physical space, be it to outlying regions of Quebec, or across national borders. Transnational contacts between local congregations and similar groups abroad, as in the case of Pentecostal churches, allows for sharing of resources and other forms of collaboration. As I have shown, these contacts may be asymmetrical rather than egalitarian. For, while the Internet offers alternatives to localized religious authority, it can be a tool for strengthening governance of religious groups at a distance.

There is no doubt that the Internet has certainly given momentum to the individualization of religious life. Following Gauthier et al. (2011), the trend toward individualization reflects to some degree the consumer capitalism of our age. In the context of what the authors term "cultural deregulation," a vast array of new religious possibilities proliferate, fueled by new media. In the new context of consumer society, the authors argue,

> highly differentiated products can now be made available, catering to a vast range of identities, with very different forms of—say, Reiki—being marketed for dif-

ferent income brackets, ages and genders. [Gauthier et al. unpublished:7-8][24]

At the same time, as these authors note, religious "consumerism" is not simply a new form of narcissism, given that individuals continue to need recognition by others to validate them in their quest for authenticity and self-definition. Nor, as the authors point out, can it be assumed that individual religious agency is based on pragmatically self-interested or utilitarian motives. Emotion, for example, enters into such choices, as do identity concerns.

The results of our study suggest that the individualization of religious life brings with it new burdens and obligations. In a context of symbolic abundance and choice, the quality of personal, subjective religious experience is seen as depending a great deal on the individual. Part of being a "pilgrim," as Hervieu-Léger (1999:109) terms those whose religious orientation places the personal quest for meaning above institutional regulation, is taking responsibility for the quality of one's spiritual life. The "pilgrim" stance is typically characterized by mobile beliefs, practices and affiliations. However, as Hervieu-Léger notes (1999:95-96), even individuals who remain active in the religion in which they were socialized, such as practicing Catholics, may see themselves as "pilgrims" of a sort; that is, as being engaged in a search for meaning. Similarly, Muslims interviewed in previous research I have directed in the past (Meintel and Le Gall 2009) often emphasize the centrality of one's personal spiritual trajectory, even for those born into the faith.

Berger and Ezzy (2004) expected that the teenaged witches they interviewed in Australia and the United States would be "frivolous" in their spirituality, but discovered this was far from being the case. Rather, the young practitioners they interviewed made extensive use of libraries, bookstores and online resources, including complex training programs that appear similar to those of the ADF used by the young Montreal Druids mentioned earlier. Similarly, the Montreal Pagans studied by Roberts constantly seek to revitalize their spiritual practice through the rituals they discover on the Internet or through library research. Typically, these are borrowed from other spiritual traditions or other currents of Paganism. On the basis of her case studies, Roberts finds that these Pagans:

> will do what they can to keep their spirituality alive, moving, and meaningful. If they come to an end of one path, they will either move in a different direction altogether, or they will seek out aspects from other sources that can be incorporated into the work they are already doing. [Roberts 2009:101-102]

Similarly, many who attend the Spiritualist church I have been following for over a decade acquire other practices along the way (meditation, sweat lodges, or so on) while hanging onto Catholic practices and beliefs—prayers to the Virgin, visits to St. Joseph's Oratory (associated with Brother André, canonized in 2010)—that they still find meaningful (Meintel 2012). This throws something of a new light on the eclectic, à la carte spiritualities that have attracted many in Quebec away from Catholic practice in the form of Sunday Mass. Rather than new denominational affiliations, the native-born Quebecois interviewed in our team study are often seeking what I call "tools for transcendence," ways to experience contact with the sacred. It is often via the new (to Quebec, at least) spiritualities that are part of their personal spiritual bricolage that they have the direct experience of the Divine or the Sacred reported by so many Quebecois in Bibby's research mentioned earlier.

Typically, although today's religious "pilgrims" in Quebec are drawn to groups that do not demand exclusive religious belonging and require little in terms of institutional involvement, they do make important sacrifices in pursuing spiritual well-being. Apart from the cost of workshops, intensive retreats, and other activities, there are often specific requirements for attending or performing rituals. For example, the neoshamanic rituals studied by our team (among Druids, in an Ayahuasca group, in "Native Spirituality" groups) often require a period of abstention from alcohol and sexual activity and in some cases, from coffee and certain foods as well. A woman who practices a Native-inspired form of spirituality wears skirts as much as possible because of the symbolic importance of this garb in Native shamanism (Corneiller 2011). Practicing Buddhism may involve long periods of meditation as well as abstinence from alcohol and other drugs. Such constraints are embraced by individuals who have rebelled against the strictures of religious institutions in the past because they are seen as necessary for reaching a certain level of spiritual experience.

Conclusion

Our team research gives much evidence that the Internet contributes to individualization of religion by multiplying available sources of religious authority, knowledge and information, and opportunities for exchange about religious issues. It is also investing various social actors with new possibilities of religious agencies: disaffected sect members, converts and potential converts, youth, not to mention the many online purveyors of religious and spiritual resources. At the same time, our study finds that the Internet can bolster religious institutions by strengthening religious governance and generating networking and exchange within and between congregations, while providing ritual and administrative resources for religious leaders. New kinds of religious conviviality (Meintel 2010) are emerging for which the Internet plays an important, sometimes crucial, role. Religious landscapes and neighbourhoods, to borrow Appadurai's (1996) terminology, are now virtual as well as physical. In the end, the issue is less one of individuals versus collectivities, but rather one of how the Internet is changing the parameters of religious sociality, how it is reconfiguring the relationships among religious actors as well as between these actors and religious collectivities.

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Notes

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2 The first person plural as used in this article refers to the author and the other researchers on the team who are named in Note 1.

3 These include, for example, governance, ritual life, transnational contacts, social activities, differentiation of members by ethnicity, age and gender, healing practices, mobilization of the body and emotions, family norms and individual religious practices.

4 Abridged digital versions of reports from the project are available at www.grdu.umontreal.ca/fr/publications-workingpapers.html.

5 Notable contributions include Marcotte (ed.) 2010, Højsgaard and Warburg (eds.) 2005; Dawson and Cowan (eds.) 2004.

6 For example, virtual pilgrimages to Compostela (http://www.caminodesantiago.me.uk/forum/camino-frances/1635-virtual-pilgrimage-group-leaves-usa-long-walk-santiago.html), to Mecca (http://www.pbs.org/muhammad/virtualhajj.shtml), both accessed March 19, 2011.

7 The authors add that these figures do not take into account the multiple changes of affiliation by individuals, nor changes of those who return to their original faith after having changed religions.

8 Mossière (2008) sees such conversions as expressing criticism of modern society and in particular of the family models current in Quebec. For further information, see Mossière (2010a, 2010c).

9 www.topchretien.com.

10 Touba is the sacred city of the founder of Muridism, Sheikh Amadou Bamba; Porokhane is that of his mother, Mam Diarra Bousso.

11 http://www.institut-soufi.ca/IsmAng/Activity.html (accessed March 19, 2011).
12 www.shamanism.org/index.php (accessed January 5, 2012).
13 www.cosmic-muse.com/reclaiming/home.html (accessed January 5, 2012).
14 www.meetup.com (accessed January 5, 2012).
15 Umbanda is a syncretic Brazilian religion founded in 1920 in which participants incorporate spirit entities (see Brown 1994).
16 Like all proper names used herein, this is a pseudonym.
17 In at least one case I know of, a European group was removed from the worldwide Temple for this reason.
18 http://www.adf.org/core/ (accessed January 5, 2012).
19 Older, Francophone Druids are likely to be secretive given the prejudice against them in the era of Catholic hegemony and some, according to Daigneault (2011) still practice secretly. Daigneault learned of cases dating from the 1980s when Druids lost their jobs for religious reasons; similarly, Rosemary Roberts found a small, very secretive Francophone coven of Wiccans in her research on Montreal Pagans.
20 For example, for conversion to Judaism, www.convert.org/; to Catholicism http://www.ancient-future.net/conversion .html; see also news.catholique.org/13733-%C2%AB-Que -signifie-se-convertir-?-%BB,-question-et (all accessed January 5, 2012).
21 For example, the multilingual sites www.catholic.net/ and www.catholic.org; for Judaism, http://reclaimingjudaism .org/) (all accessed January 5, 2012).
22 www.fellowshipofisis.com/ (accessed January 5, 2012).
23 http://www.jerusalem-montreal.org/bienvenue.html (accessed January 5, 2012).
24 Gauthier et al. (2011) is based on this manuscript, which was transmitted to me by François Gauthier; however, the passages I cite here were not included in the published version.

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