Virtual Theology, Faith and Adult Education

Virtual Theology, Faith and Adult Education:
An Interruptive Pedagogy

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P U B L I S H I N G

Sincere thanks are expressed to my family, above all to my husband, Hugh, whose enthusiasm always motivates and sustains me.

Gratitude is also due to friends, colleagues and supporters, both near and far.

Finally, this book is dedicated to my parents, now deceased, who taught me the true value of faith and education.

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Starting Points

This book explores the intersections of theology, faith and education and raises questions about adult religious learning in an online world. It asks whether online learning brings a new pedagogy, and if so, then how can Christian educators engage with Internet technologies for lifelong learning in a contemporary church. Part I visits diverse and complex landscapes, which include adult education principles and theory, the philosophy and practice of Christian adult education, and the rise of online education. Part II tells the story of one theological institution's move into online education and draws upon original research investigation to examine what happens when a programme of continuing professional development in Christian faith and theology goes online.

The advancement of online education is a recent but rapid phenomenon which has entered mainstream educational policy, provision and practice. The context underpinning this book reflects a UK setting, but the reality is that online learning is a world-wide phenomenon and a growing industry, with the United States leading the way forward. Online education, in various guises, courses and applications, is widespread, with growing enrolments across higher education, schools K-12, military, corporate, workplace, community and voluntary settings. We will see later that frequent claims are made for the opportunities it carries, alongside recognition of resultant challenges and limitations. One leading claim from researchers and practitioners, however, is that online learning is revolutionising the world of education and bringing new or transformed approaches to teaching and learning. But this is open to question and if online education is to reach mature development and evaluation then it must be open to critical appraisal. So, we can ask: does online education demand or carry a new (disruptive) pedagogy, or does it result in maintenance or replication (sustaining) of traditional values and existing practices? What might the opportunities and benefits be? Who stands to gain? Who stands to lose? And what evidence is there to evaluate the quality and learning effectiveness of an online educational programme? What interpretation can be made and why is this significant?

The purpose of this book is specifically to address online education with regards to adult theological or faith-based learning. The aim is to explore how Christian educators can approach online education for the purposes of adult personal or professional learning. This has already been shown to be an area of some contention in cases where when established academic or ecclesial practices and cherished traditions or values are seen as threatened when handed over to online delivery. I have lost count of the number of times that I have personally heard it said that "religious (or theological) education just can't be done online!" Institutions and faculty themselves can be hesitant, resistant or perhaps ignorant about delivery of their discipline within the online environment, preferring to maintain the idea of traditional curriculum, pedagogy and relationships. Student perceptions, too, can regard online education with some suspicion or hostility and show preference for more traditional forms of academic activity. So, questions can be posed as to whether a new model for Christian engagement with the Internet for the educational mission of the contemporary church is possible or even desirable.

By way of response, this book offers an expanded case study approach to examine one theology programme of continuing professional development across England and Wales, delivered fully online to adult participants working in education and pastoral ministry settings. It asks what sort of pedagogy is relevant for adult theological education and whether online learning can support this. It presents evidence from faculty and student perspectives to see if a perceived transformative role and innovative function for online education, as suggested by much of the literature, matches actual experience. Then, using first-hand data collected from faculty and the student body, alongside practitioner evidence and programme evaluation documentation, the study evaluates the quality of online teaching and learning that occurred across a three-year period. Key areas emerge from this for deeper consideration, particularly the relation of pedagogy to issues of autonomy and authority, and to human communication, community and relationships in the virtual learning environment. Such matters become leading questions and key concerns when the online world collides with the Christian educational context.

Key Questions

A number of key questions can be highlighted as central to this book:

- Which theories and pedagogies inform adult learning?
- How do adults learn in theology or faith?

- What pedagogies and practices currently shape online education?
- What opportunities and challenges does online learning present?
- What can online adult theological education look like in practice? What do faculty and students make of this?
- How can Christian educators deploy virtual networking and build relationships for educational purposes?
- What does an online study community of faith inquiry have to recommend it?
- How can Christian tradition intersect with the personal autonomy and self-expression of the virtual world?
- How does this impact upon traditional methods of faith-based teaching and learning?
- What sort of pedagogy does online learning suggest for adult theological education and faith formation?
- What evaluation can be offered to other Christian educators considering online theological programme delivery?

In focusing on such matters and responding to these questions, this book suggests that online learning invites an *interruptive pedagogy*. This concept forms an interpretative model drawn from a Christian theology of interruption (Boeve, 2007).Taking a traditional course and "going online" can breathe new life and thinking; it can break continuity with or interrupt established philosophies, pedagogies and practices. At the same time, evidence suggests that an online study programme can maintain continuity with the curriculum, knowledge, skills, values and wisdom of a traditional approach. Online stakeholders, therefore, need to "culture" their use of educational technologies and become "agile adopters" who are simultaneously well-grounded in existing educational practice yet also alive to new possibilities and new ways (Masterman & Vogel, 2007). Later chapters in Part II present a number of propositions to support a concept of *interruptive pedagogy* and further explore the significance in terms of quality provision for future online adult theological education.

In offering a model of *interruptive pedagogy*, I hope that a significant contribution can be made to both church and academy by affirming that exciting opportunities are brought by media technologies and innovative forms of online educational delivery yet, at the same time, cautioning that there are theological, pedagogical and socio-cultural challenges to be faced. As we move through the chapters, we will see that this model serves to appraise critically the technological culture of today as well as promote an online pedagogy that draws on sound Christian educational theory and tradition. In so doing, a genuine contribution can be made to the field of

Christian education as well as to all those interested in deploying online education for adult continuing personal or professional learning.

Synopsis of Chapters

The book is broadly structured as follows. Part I consists of the first four chapters and maps the contours of adult learning, adult theological education and online education. Chapter One introduces the reader to an online world and presents the critical framework, context and rationale behind the study. Chapter Two moves on to explore lifelong learning and the pedagogy of adult education before then laying out a landscape for Catholic adult education in England and Wales. Chapter Three considers the Internet as disruptive technology and then investigates the rise of online learning, particularly in relation to constructivist pedagogy and the online community of inquiry model. Chapter Four focuses on church, culture and the new technologies, exploring the magisterial vision alongside the voices of those who critique and question the role and influence of the new media. This chapter also takes up conversation with three Christian educators who are engaging theology and technology in their current teaching and ministry.

In Part II, the book moves into practical illustration and example. Chapter Five turns to specific examination and evaluation of online theological education in order to investigate the opportunities, questions and particular concerns that arise. It presents a case study of one online adult theological programme run over a period of three years and presents original evidence gathered from the online experience of teaching faculty and the student body. From there, the remaining chapters of the book build the concept of *interruptive pedagogy* as an illustrative and explanatory model for understanding the intersection between online learning and Christian adult education. Two key issues are addressed for particular analysis and consideration. Chapter Six takes up the question of what an online community of inquiry can bring by way of a new pedagogy for adult learning and explores the human relational as well as the educational and theological issues which emerge. Chapter Seven examines important concerns surrounding online authority in relation to epistemological, contextual and methodological aspects of theological education and faith formation within an online learning community. The concluding Chapter Eight returns to the original question of whether online education can offer a new pedagogy for adult theological education. It asks what opportunities and challenges are presented and what theological, educational and technological guidelines might be suggested for future practice to

Christian educators and other learning providers looking to engage online technologies within adult learning communities for faith education.

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

AN ONLINE WORLD

Introduction

Before turning attention to principles and pedagogies of online learning and Christian adult education, it is relevant in this opening chapter to acknowledge the wider contemporary context. The Second Vatican Council document *Gaudium et Spes*[1] called for a greater attentiveness to the signs of the times and for knowledge and understanding to be paid to the culture of the day, including what it termed the "increasing technology" (paragraph 62), in order for the church to take a place in the modern world. If this call is taken seriously, then Web 2.0 technologies cannot be ignored or overlooked as they belong to the social, cultural, educational and religious landscapes of today.[2] Evidence for this online context can be demonstrated in three ways: through rising statistics of Internet deployment; through the phenomenon of religious activity online; and in the technological direction of contemporary educational policy. Each aspect is now addressed in turn.

Signs of the Times: Living in an Online World

Since the second half of the twentieth century, there has been a rapid rise in broadcast, visual and digital media technologies. Initial computer networks were developed as communications and information exchange systems for political, academic and military defence purposes. From here, the Internet emerged as a system of electronic intercommunication with

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[1] Vatican II documents can be found in Abbott, W. ed. (1967) *Documents of the Second Vatican Council*, London: Geoffrey Chapman.

[2] Web 2.0 refers to the second generation development of the Internet. It highlights online features and functionality such as blogs, video sharing, wikis, podcasts and social networking. The Internet has advanced from a Web 1.0 communication and information exchange to become an interactive, interoperable and collaborative virtual world. Web 2.0 is a label for this concept.

electronic mail (email) quickly becoming one of its most popular features. By the early 1990s, the use of hypertext for processing and presenting digital information on personal computers in a single information network helped the development of the World Wide Web, soon to become accessible and available on an unprecedented scale. The Internet has since expanded at pace, along with the emergence of related online applications, into a meta-medium of sophisticated and interactive networks within an increasingly interconnected society. It has impacted across spheres of society including business, commerce, law, politics, education, entertainment and leisure. It has become a medium that combines technological performance with the human and social capacity for communication (Bazin & Cottin, 2004: 11). It is viewed as the fastest growing and most sophisticated information and communications system in human civilization and has been described as "a resource of unparalleled possibilities" (Jolliffe, 2001: 1). This claim is made not only for western high-income countries but also for the developing world as well, which is also seeing fast-rising rates of Internet access and use. Fink and Kenny (2003) observe that the remarkable thing about the digital divide is no longer its size but rather the wide spectrum of engagement evident in an increasingly technologically sophisticated and globalised digital world.[3]

Claims for the sociological impact and change wrought by the new media technologies upon everyday living have been made since the late 1980s. "Most of us have become technologized and we do not even know it" (McDonnell & Trampiets, 1989: 50). One way to illustrate this is to consider how the Internet has become a feature of life today for increasing numbers of people. A World Internet Users and Population Statistics report (2011) suggests that out of a world population of almost 7 billion, almost 2.5 billion are Internet users. In terms of Internet distribution by world regions, Asia comes out with the highest number of Internet users, followed by Europe and then North America. Statistics relating to Internet usage in individual countries mirror these rising rates of access and availability. For example, Internet World Stats (2010) reported over 51 million Internet users in the UK in June 2010: this had grown rapidly from the 40 million users reported in December 2007. Office for National Statistics (2010) records indicate that over 19.2 million households (73 per

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[3] The term "digital divide" referred initially to the division between those who *access* technology and those who do not. A more nuanced interpretation recognises differences in *use* of computer technologies. Both are due to various factors including geographical location, availability and accessibility of technical infrastructure, economic, socio-cultural or educational factors, or simply personal preference or choice.

cent) had Internet access in 2010, which reflected an increase of 0.9 million on the previous year and an increase of 5 million since 2006. EMarketer (2010), which provides research and analysis on digital marketing and media, reports that Internet use in the UK has continued to climb steadily, especially among residents aged 50 years and older, known as "silver surfers". This report characterises the UK as having one of the most mature Internet populations in Europe. Surveys conducted by the Oxford Internet Institute (OxIS) indicate that two-thirds of all Britons used the Internet regularly at home during 2007, with information-seeking for creative, research-educational and social purposes representing the most popular online activities (Dutton & Helsper, 2007). The latest OxIS survey confirms that Internet use in Britain grew from just over 60% in 2003 to 73% in 2011. It also defines an increasing trend of "next generation users" who access the Internet from multiple locations using mobile devices such as readers, tablets and laptop computers, in addition to smart phones and other Personal Digital Assistants (Dutton & Blank, 2011).

While surveys and reports from such varied sources are open to interpretation, they nevertheless offer broad indicators for a growing Internet adoption and usage among the UK population over the last decade. This is confirmed by the UK government report *Digital Britain* (Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2009), which presents a vision of living and working in the UK at the start of the twenty-first century. The report states that digital technology, particularly Broadband Internet, is now the common backbone for numerous services that most people take for granted and is becoming increasingly essential for living in a modern society. It speaks of the growth of online participation among the UK population and of national plans for further encouraging and boosting digital inclusion, participation, and skills, by

> increasing the reach, breadth and depth of digital technology use across all sections of society, to maximise digital participation and the economic and social benefits it can bring (p.41).

Signs of the Times: Religion Online

Religious activity online belongs to the signs of the times. A vast amount of religious material can be found online and every major religious tradition has Internet representation. Sociologists depict religion on the Internet as a broad, varied and complex phenomenon of sharing religious information, interaction and spiritual expression. Millions of people use the Internet for religious purposes and the number of religious websites has grown exponentially since the 1990s. In 1999, the search engine

Yahoo's Religion and Spirituality subsection had 11,000 websites focusing on Christian beliefs and practices: by August 2002, this had increased more than threefold to over 37,000 sites. The search engine Lycos saw a 70% rise in the number of religious websites in its directory, rising from 57,790 sites in 2000 to 96,484 sites by August 2002, an increase not reflected in any other category of web activity (Hellend, 2004: 26). By 2001, it was claimed that over one million religious websites were in existence. These included all major world religions alongside new alternative or popular religious movements (Brasher, 2001: 6). Hojsgaard and Warburg (2005) also claim a similar escalation in the number of religious websites. They report that at the end of the 1990s there were over 1.7 million web pages relating to religion: by 2004, this had grown to approximately 51 million. Christian web pages grew from 610,470 sites in 1991 to over 9 million in November 2004, a relative increase of almost 1400%. Web searches conducted under terms including "church", "denomination", "faith", "God" and "theology" all indicate a similar huge increase in the number of web pages devoted to these topics (Hojsgaard & Warburg, 2005: 3).

Studies examining the Internet for religious uses suggest similar trends for increased activity from greater numbers of people. The report on *Faith Online* (Pew Internet and American Life Project) shows that 64% of 128 million American Internet users perform spiritual and religious activities online (Clark et al., 2004). This represents nearly 82 million people who seek religious information, read religious news or current affairs, exchange emails with religious or spiritual content, respond to religious charities or requests, participate in online religious discussion or blogs, or engage in online activity for evangelisation, faith education or ministry training. The majority go online for personal spiritual reasons which include religious seeking outside their own traditions. Yet they also remain deeply grounded in their own religious tradition, and so their Internet activity supplements their ties to traditional or existing institutions rather than moving them away from their church or community. However, this report relates to American Internet users; it cannot be assumed that religious use of the Internet is similar in the UK. Davie (1994) characterised a changing UK religious scene of declining membership and affiliation to traditional religious institutions alongside a corresponding declining attendance at religious services on any regular basis. How this affects online religious activity among UK Internet users lies open to speculation. The Oxford Internet Surveys, which have been establishing Internet access, use and attitudes in British society since 2003, hold little data on online religious activity, which suggests that either this lacks relevance for the researchers

or lacks significance in relation to the question of Internet usage in everyday life in Britain. There was a rise in the percentage number of people using the Internet for religious purposes between 2005 and 2007, but this reflected infrequent behaviour patterns of monthly religious activity online (Dutton & Helsper, 2007).

In order to understand this emerging phenomenon, Hellend (2004) distinguishes religion online from online religion. Religion online emerges from traditional or official sources set up by mainstream parishes, congregations, religious institutions or agencies. It refers to traditional religions, including Christianity, which use their online activities as anchors to the offline world with links to past tradition and mainstream practice (Brasher, 2001). In contrast, online religion relates to unofficial religious participation or activity in popular or self-acclaimed websites, including those of new and alternative religious movements. Young (2004) also places emphasis on the locus of activity to which the religious website gives reference. Offline and pre-existing religious traditions represent religion online, while it is cyberspace itself that is the primary context for online religion. Karaflogka (2002) discerns between religion *on* cyberspace and religion *in* cyberspace. The former relates to religions which primarily exist in the offline world, including Christianity, while religion in cyberspace is reserved for religions that are created and exist exclusively in the virtual world. This represents a difference in context as well as in function. Hojsgaard & Warburg (2005) likewise confine religion in cyberspace to its more specific or exclusive virtual definition and suggest this represents a move away from real bodily presence, from the established content of major religious traditions and from traditional religious organisation, authority and hierarchy.

What seems clear is that Internet religious activity is a growing, complex and multifaceted phenomenon which includes mainstream and conventional religious expression as well as newer, alternative religious movements and activity in cyberspace. Such plurality and diversity has been described as a bricolage of religious (and anti-religious) faiths, beliefs and practices on the Internet. Brasher (2001: 43) has branded this "an electronic souk of the soul". It can appear to encourage a postmodern preference for religion à la carte or by personal choice (Lyon, 2000). The mass religiosity of the online medium has resulted in a proliferation of new possibilities for mainstream religions as well as non-official, non-denominational and non-affiliated new forms of religious expression and activity. A growing literature field surveys the contours of the religious landscapes of the Internet. Studies examining religion and the Internet emerged in the 1990s. Some focus on how the Internet is shaping new

forms of religious beliefs and practices and being used in diverse ways to connect technology with religious and spiritual life (Brasher, 2001). Other studies have emerged from within specific religious traditions and faith movements themselves (Bunt, 2005). Some studies offer contextualised analyses and evaluations of online experiences and practices. Examples relating to cyber-Christianity include studies on online church (Howe, 2007), online prayer (Young, 2004), online pilgrimages (MacWilliams, 2004) and online faith community (Campbell, 2004; 2005b). Such studies are contributing to a growing body of Christian literature relating to religion and the Internet.

Signs of the Times: Learning and Teaching Online

It is important right from the start of this book to acknowledge a context of significant educational change over the past twenty or so years due to an increasing adoption and deployment of online technologies for teaching and learning. The influence and impact of the Internet can be seen across education sectors from schools K-12 to post-secondary or higher education and into continuing personal and professional adult learning. The Internet, used initially to augment distance learning, now belongs within mainstream educational pedagogy, provision and practice. In schools and universities, virtual platforms or learning environments (VLEs) have been implemented to host and manage online course delivery through a consistent user interface across an institution(s). These platforms commonly use applications such as email, synchronous chat, asynchronous discussion forums, weblogs, wikis and e-portfolios as key tools in a new pedagogy for collaborative online learning. Increasing opportunities now exist in a myriad of ways for using technology to deliver out-of-classroom and in-classroom educational experiences. Teaching and learning can take place both in campus and online, in full or flexible learning mode, using traditional, blended, hybrid or fully online delivery.

Enrolments for blended and fully online courses have risen exponentially over the past ten years. A recent report from across US universities demonstrates that the number of students enrolling in one or more online courses has far outstripped campus enrollments (Allen et al., 2012). Online degrees, study programmes and individual courses are available from educational institutions around the world, some of whom only exist as virtual centres. A growing number of virtual schools now operate across Europe and North America where traditional "bricks and mortar" learning is replaced by online classes. The advertising and marketing of online courses and qualifications is commonplace in today's educational climate,

with a consumer choice as to which institution and which course best fits personal or professional needs. In a digital culture of increasing individualism, free choice and self-determination, the reality is that online education can be chosen and conducted in one's own time, pace and place and obtained from a provider who is no longer a local institution but a distant or virtual service. This changing educational scene is highlighted in recent moves by leading research universities in the United States, Canada and Europe who are joining in partnership hoping to reshape higher education by offering open online courses for students and adult learners globally. The massive open online course, otherwise known as the MOOC, has arrived.

Research literature and the reflections of online learning practitioners themselves communicate the potential of the virtual environment for collaborative and creative learning. Widespread claims are made for the benefits that online learning can bring. A greater flexibility of access and widening participation sits alongside a new diversity of educational provision. Innovative approaches to online pedagogy are linked with an improved learner engagement and educational experience. Multimedia content and e-learning design are said to create participative and collaborative opportunities as well as fostering personalised and self-directed learning. New feedback and assessment practices using web technologies are afforded for both learner and institution. However, as the body of research literature and practitioner evidence builds, the gains can be balanced by increasingly discernible losses. Technological concerns relating to learner accessibility**,** systems compatibility and usability cannot be ignored, while social and educational aspects of online learning raise pedagogic challenges and questions such as learner retention and non-participation, the quality of communication and relationships within an online study group, the changing role of the teacher, and clashes between traditional institutional approaches and online flexible provision and open delivery. Plenty of voices are heard claiming the innovative and transformative potential of online technologies for teaching and learning purposes but these now need to be assessed from within specific academic disciplines themselves. This book now attempts to do so from within the field of adult theological and faith-based education.

Why this Book?

Having illustrated something of the socio-cultural expansion of the Internet, along with the scope of religious activity online and the technological context underpinning contemporary education, it becomes

clear that Christian education needs to take account of the influence and potential of the new technologies for the educational, catechetical and evangelising mission of the church today. The press statement that accompanied Pope Benedict XVI's message for the 43rd World Communications Day states:

> The digital generation has come of age in the world of computers, mobile telephones, text and instant messaging, blogging, platforms for video content, internet chat rooms and online social networks. It would be a mistake, however, to see these changes as merely technological; they have also revolutionized the culture of communications. They have changed the ways people communicate, the ways they associate and form communities, the ways by which they learn about the world… (Tighe, 2009).

Catholic magisterial documents on social communications have explored issues relating to new technologies since the 1960s and have repeatedly called for media technology to be used in the service and mission of the church. This has been echoed in statements from other Christian denominations too, as we will see later during Chapter Four. But while a positive engagement of church and culture has been sought by many theologians, educators and church leaders, others have wrestled with the nature and influence of media technology, especially the Internet, upon society and human communication, identity and relationships. Among them are voices that caution about the new technologies as a threat for society and church and question the very concept of doing education online as dubious or to be viewed with suspicion or fear. Others state stronger objections that theological education or faith formation should not or cannot take place using web-based technologies. Such claims are explored in later chapters of this book.

Christian education, adult learning, and the pedagogy of online teaching and learning are distinct fields of enquiry, each richly resourced in literature and critically explored in both theory and practice. But this book now brings them together in a mutually engaging and receptive dialogue which claims a timely and relevant status given the technological, educational and cultural context of our day. Online theological or religious education is an emerging field with relatively little substantive research from church or academy viewpoints. Providers of online theology or religious courses have a limited research field to turn to and may well have to discern aims, approaches, pedagogies, principles and practices for themselves or else borrow or adapt them from secular practice or other educational research. This book hopes, therefore, to make an original contribution by mapping, exploring and evaluating the sort of teaching and