

Erik Alvstad

ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN BELIEVERS AND NON-BELIEVERS IN A SYMBOLIC UNIVERSE: RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND CONTROVERSY ON THE INTERNET

Abstract

The article examines aspects of the debate on faith between religious and secular actors on the Internet. Point of departure is taken in the question whether the Internet contributes to a deeper understanding and tolerance between religious and non-religious worldviews, or if it rather reproduces or possibly even intensifies existing conflicts related to religious discourse. The examination is situated in the context of what is conceived as an interplay of secularizing and counter-secularizing forces in the post-industrial, late-modern societies of the West. It is implemented by means of an analysis of the contributions posted on the discussion groups that deal with religion on a popular Swedish website.

Key words: religion, Internet, Sweden

Introduction

There is currently a widespread and intense debate on faith between religious and secular actors in various media. As I hope to show in this article the debate is represented also on the Internet. My central question is whether the Internet facilitates a fruitful dialogue, promoting understanding and tolerance between religious and non-religious worldviews, or if it rather reproduces or perhaps even deepens the elements of conflict and intolerance that are so prone to cut into debates about religion. The issue will be put in a wider social and scholarly context and given a tentative answer by way of an analysis of the online discussions on a major Swedish website.

The article divides into two main sections: In the first one, my question will be assessed in relation to contemporary studies of the Internet and religion. As an easily accessible meeting place for individuals with different cultural backgrounds and religious affiliations, the Internet has been described as a medium that is remarkably well suited for inter-religious dialogue, harbouring an enormous potential to promote under-

standing and tolerance (Brasher 2001). Other scholars have adopted a considerable more negative view towards the Internet, claiming that online religious communication is often characterized by intolerance, prejudice and vehement polemics, and that interaction in this symbolic universe rather leads to an escalation of conflict in relation to religious discourse (Lövheim 2004). Yet others take an intermediate position with regard to the Internet's suitability for dialogue (Højsgaard 2004). My own observations, presented below, will be related to these positions.

In the second section, the assembled empirical material will be assessed. To allow insight into how the debate between the advocates and the critics of religion is conducted online, I have examined the contributions posted on the discussion groups that deal with religion on one of the most popular Swedish websites (*Passagen*) during one month (October 2008). The analysis of this new data has a quantitative component, in the sense that it accounts for the frequency with which the various topics on the site receive contributions, and a qualitative one, since it provides concrete examples of such contributions and examines the rhetoric employed in them.

Religion and the Internet

Even a cursory examination of contemporary media, popular culture and public discourse confirms the conclusions drawn by of Berger and many other scholars: Religion is not at all vanishing from the modern world and especially young people in the post-industrial societies of the West today show a renewed interest in religious and spiritual matters (Berger 1997, 1999).

At present religion seems to be more visible in Western society than it has been for a very long time. TV-shows and films with religious themes abound; in newspapers, magazines and on the radio religion and various theological issues have become increasingly more debated. Hence religion has undergone a «mediatization», i.e. a «process through which core elements of a social or cultural activity (...) assume media form» (Hjarvard 2008a:13; see also Hjarvard 2008b:155–213; Lundby (ed.) 2009). In its essentials this development is true also with regard to Sweden. The phenomenon referred to by theologians as «the return of God», and by sociologists as «desecularization» or «sacralization» is taking place in an allegedly secular Scandinavian country such as Sweden as well (see Hagevi 2001, 2002; Sigurdson 2003; Svenungsson 2004; Thalén 2007).

While Berger (1997, 1999) and others speak about the astonishing vitality of religion in the modern world, an opposing movement should also be acknowledged; a movement critical of religion and its effects on the individual and society, and that some scholars call «the new atheism» (Beattie 2007; Haught 2008). This critical tendency, which has had a great impact on the public debate, is manifested also in Sweden: Works of Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris and Onfray have been translated into Swedish, and books and magazines in a similar critical vein are written and published in this language as well (e.g. Sturmark 2006). Furthermore, lately the major atheist organization, called *Humanisterna* (The Humanists), has been more active in the public debate than ever before.

Religion on the Internet

The resurgence of religion – as well as the critical reaction against it – is reflected also on the Internet. Religion is represented in numerous ways on the Internet and websites with religious content are among the most visited (Højsgaard and Warburg 2005:2–5). All conceivable religious traditions, organizations and interests are represented on the Internet: We find the websites of organizations linked to what perhaps can be designated traditional or «mainstream» religion, such as the Vatican, the Swedish Church, Young Muslims of Sweden, or the Union for Reform Judaism (see Dawson and Cowan 2004:93–147). Anti-modern groups, such as the ultra-orthodox Chassidic group Chabad, are also represented on the Internet, as are many radical religious movements. Sites are also maintained by NRMs (New Religious Movements), for example The Church of Scientology or a UFO religion such as The Raëlian Church, which can both be characterized as modernistic and scientific groups (see Dawson and Cowan 2004:151–219). Typically these sites are oriented towards attracting interest to and transmitting information about the respective community's religious, social, ethical, political etc. agenda.

Apart from the sites of specific groups there are also megasites that cover several different religions and spiritual orientations, such as Beliefnet (Beliefnet). Some sites are discussion groups, while others offer advice on religious doctrine or law, for example Askmoses and IslamOnline (Askmoses.com; IslamOnline.net). Yet other sites provide virtual religious experiences, for example virtual meditation, virtual prayer, and virtual pilgrimage. A few websites are multidimensional, and besides distributing information about various religious traditions and practices, they simultaneously provide interactive applications such as discussion forums, chat rooms, bulletin boards, newsgroups and diverse virtual experiences. Beliefnet is one example of such a site.

To classify the content of religious websites Christopher Helland (2000) makes an analytic distinction between «religion-online» and «online-religion». Religion-online is characterized by a traditional top-down communication, from specific providers of religious content to unspecific receivers of this content. Typically such websites only provide information but no interaction. As a rule they belong to institutional religious organizations and the religious messages they communicate tend to be quite conventional. Websites that belong to organizations such as those mentioned above are examples of religion-online.

Online-religion, on the other hand, is characterized by a bottom-up communication that draws on the various interactive applications of the Internet. It allows the user substantial freedom to partake in the construction of the religious content of the site. That is, whereas the conventional form of communication and content that distinguish religion-online tend to reproduce traditional hierarchical religion, the content that comes out of online-religion is much more unstable and fluid, since it relies on new forms of communication based on the ideals of an open, unstructured and non-hierarchical interaction. Thus online-religion allows for the interaction and participation of the individual user, and according to Helland it represents a direct reaction to the phenomenon of religion in a secular and pluralistic world.

However, the line of demarcation between religion-online and online-religion is not always as clear as the distinction suggests; something that Helland (2005) has acknowledged in later writings. Many websites today provide both information *and* more interactive spaces where religion can be lived and discussed. The multidimensional character of a site such as Beliefnet, for example, provides content of both categories. Beliefnet is a commercial website that was launched in 1999 by Steven Waldman. His purpose was to establish a site that offers both information about all kinds of religiosity as well the means to conduct religious debate and online interaction (Højsgaard 2004:273–282, 2006:172–174). Thus Beliefnet provides not only information zones where various religious experts provide information about traditional and new religions, but also interaction zones where the users of the website themselves can interact with each other and participate in forming the religious content (e.g. via discussion forums, prayer groups, the application called Belief-o-Matic etc.).

Correspondingly, it might be assumed that individuals that make use of the Internet in their search for religious information and meaning engage in both information zones and interaction zones of the religious sites, and thus take part both of content that can be described as religion-online and as online-religion. Nevertheless, the distinction can be used as a heuristic tool by which the content of religious websites can be classified in a preliminary way. The aspect of Internet religion dealt with in this article is mainly what is called online-religion, as I focus on those interactive zones where the users themselves have the opportunity to interact with each other and express their opinions and sentiments on religion.

Internet: A platform for global fellowship or escalating interreligious conflicts?

Among many other things the Internet has been referred to as «a symbolic space» (Introvigne 2005), «a social network» (Jones 1997), and «the ultimate Diaspora» (Brasher 2001). It has also been characterized as a dynamic arena of circulation and exchange between diverse producers and receivers of information and other symbolic content (Slevin 2000:78–85). The Internet not only opens up new possibilities for communication, work, education, manipulation and amusement. As a new medium actively used by almost all religious organizations and interests for a wide range of purposes, it will most likely reshape traditional religious identities, beliefs and practices in a profound way – similar to, some argue, how the printing press transformed the religious sphere a few hundred years ago (O’Leary 2005). Additionally, the Internet provides a new and easily accessible arena for cross-cultural and interreligious encounters, that is, a space in which representatives from different religions as well as critics of religion can interact with each other, engage in dialogue and debate, compare experiences, and perhaps arrange mutual projects.

The establishing of a new technology always gives rise to a range of responses. This is true also with respect to the Internet. There are, as Heidi Campbell (2003:214) observes as regards the Christian community’s reaction to the Internet, «advocates who promote its use, critics who are sceptical of its effects and those who stand between these viewpoints». As I will argue with reference to a handful of scholars, viz. Brasher,

Lövheim, and Højsgaard, these positions are to a certain extent mirrored in contemporary research on the Internet.

Brenda Brasher has a relatively positive view of the capacity of the Internet to promote religious understanding and tolerance. In her book *Give Me That Online Religion* she describes the Internet as the ultimate Diaspora (2001:24–44). A reason for this designation is that cyberspace tends to diminish or alter the significance of physical location in a radical way. Religious communities and individuals that communicate via the Internet are dispersed over a vast global electronic net, where they can access each other and the Internet's immense religious material by the mere press of a button. That is, a person who connects to the Internet enters a kind of Diaspora, disengaged from the physical location and ordinary, «real» world context she is otherwise situated in. The diasporic space of the Internet is completely lacking in centre and stable locations. Instead an unrestrained spreading and mixing of ideas and identities is perpetually going on by means of search engines, online debates, homepages, hyperlinks, newsgroups, MUDs (multi user dungeons), E-mail lists, chat-rooms and bulletin boards. In fact, it is quite impossible to keep ideas, practices and identities isolated from each other in cyberspace, and just as difficult to make them remain unaffected. Consequently, its construction makes the Internet an eminent tool if one wants to spread and mix religious ideas, practices and identities. The new religious contexts that have been formed on and by the Internet as a consequence of these processes, will, Brasher argues, eventually also lead to substantial changes in the religious landscape on a global scale.

One central change, according to Brasher (2001:42), is that the interactivity offered by the Internet allows the individual user to participate in religious discourse independently and without the mediation of traditional religious hierarchies; something that leads to a progressive decline in the authority of these hierarchies. She (2001:42) also claims that the importance of holy scriptures and religious doctrine will be undermined as people without effort, and by themselves, can access, read, interpret and discuss religious texts on the Internet, where all conceivable religious texts are available. This will also result in a more general destabilization of uniform and coherent systems of belief and a declining significance of established religious practice.

Brasher is optimistic about this prospect. Even though positive to religion and religiosity as such she also considers religion to be a platform of many destructive phenomena, such as xenophobia and religiously motivated hate and violence. However, she (2001:6–7, 11) believes that the Internet will counteract the negative impact of religion on such conflicts. By weakening the traditional religious hierarchies and by providing a place for meeting and dialogue between adherents of different religions she holds that the Internet will make a contribution to solving many conflicts that have their roots in intolerant religious leaders, or in prejudices caused by lack of contact between ordinary believers.

While Brasher has a positive view of the impact of computer-mediated communication on religion and argues that the Internet has the potential to make «a unique contribution to global fellowship in the frequently volatile area of interreligious understanding» (2001:6–7), a more sceptical view is evinced by Morten Højsgaard (2006). He

argues that by making possible interfaith encounters on a scale previously unheard of communication on the Internet sometimes facilitates interreligious tolerance and understanding, especially in the organized interreligious dialogue. However, at times computer-mediated interaction rather leads to escalating symbolic conflicts concerning religious issues. He (2006:174–178) points out that conflictual encounters and debates conducted in a rude and prejudiced language are more likely to occur in religious interchanges of a more coincidental nature; that is, in virtual discussions about religious issues by means of conversational applications on the web such as discussion forums, newsgroups and chat rooms. In other words, religious conflicts on the Internet seem more likely to take place in what Helland calls online-religion.

Højsgaard also concludes that many of these virtual conflicts relate to real world issues. They might, for example, derive from stereotypes and old prejudices between believers of different faiths, such as Christians and Muslims. However, his (2006:176) impression is that online conflicts about religion first and foremost reflect the tension between, on the one hand, religiously motivated Internet users and, on the other, non-religiously motivated users. As will be shown with regard to the Swedish context, the polarized opinions and uncompromising attitudes between religious believers and secularists/atheists are not untypical of communication about religion on the Internet.

Internet, religion, and young people in Sweden

From the point of view of religious studies the Internet can be considered to be a tool by which the individual acquires knowledge about religion and searches for religious meaning amongst a plethora of spiritual alternatives. It also provides the individual with an interactive arena of self-fashioning; i.e. a public space in which she can create and articulate her identity, including her religious identity, together with other people. These aspects of the Internet are of great importance for people in Sweden, and especially for young people, who are huge consumers of online information and communication (Nordicom-Sveriges Internetbarometer 2007).

A valuable study of young Swedes' religious interaction on the Internet and the role of this activity in the formation of the individual's religious identity has been conducted by Mia Lövheim (2004; see also Lövheim 2007; Lövheim and Linderman 2005). During a period of one year she followed the discussions in eight discussion groups dealing with religion on a large Swedish web community for young people. Additionally, she followed up with interviews of some of the participants, both boys and girls between 18 and 20 years of age. Confirming Inglehart's (1990, 1997) observations about the priorities of the «post-materialists» Lövheim shows that personal choice of religious orientation was highly valued among these young Swedes. Largely critical of religious authorities, the participants draw on the multitude of religious alternatives that they come into contact with on the Internet – not only traditional religions, but also Shamanism, Paganism, Wicca, Satanism, Atheism etc. – in order to fashion their own religious identity. Thus the Internet is used as a kind of religious smorgasbord; a resource from which elements from various traditions are drawn together by the

individual in the process of negotiating her religious identity in interaction with other people (both online and in the real world).

The young participants in Lövheim's study represented a wide spectrum of religious beliefs and attitudes (2004:169–249). However, notwithstanding the plurality of religious identities and perspectives of the interacting participants it seems that generally they did not conceive the online discussions they were involved in as anything remotely similar to an open and enriching religious dialogue, conducted in mutual respect for each other's opinions and convictions. On the contrary; the form of communication, with necessarily short and hastily written, preferably provocative, commentaries, in combination with many of the participants' preconceived opinions of other religions and their adherents, resulted in a rather unfruitful climate of debate in which the discussions tended to become very polarized, lacking in nuances, besides being competitive and often antagonistic. This tendency was reinforced by an apparent hierarchy in the group: Those who had participated frequently or for a long time in the discussion dismissed newcomers primarily on account of them bringing up issues that had already been on the group's agenda.

Of particular relevance to the present discussion is Lövheim's (2004:136–142, 256–261) observation that the extremely dichotomized relations between believers and non-believers tended to reduce the possibilities of open and constructive discussions about religion. According to Lövheim the non-believers were in majority and as they were highly active in the discussions they had a tendency to dominate them. These non-believers were critical of all religion, which they considered dangerous and enslaving. Notably Christian participants were consistently accused of being naïve and gullible by the former. Disappointed with the lack of tolerance and the frequent misunderstandings that were expressed throughout the discussions, and tired of being ascribed stereotypical roles that they did not consider representative of themselves and their beliefs, the majority of participants left the discussion group within a year. They had come to the conclusion that this kind of online religious interaction was unable to fulfil their expectations of being able to create a common understanding of beliefs, values and ideals.

Lövheim's results lead her to reject the optimistic views of the Internet as a medium that more or less automatically promotes a pluralistic and open debate, easy to participate in for everyone. Contrary to what is often claimed, there is seldom room for a great number of different perspectives in online discussions. The young people who left the discussion groups due to what they perceived as a lack of reciprocity and tolerance considered the climate of the online debates to be as harsh and polarized as that of a typical classroom. Thus Lövheim draws the conclusion that the hierarchies of the «real» world are reproduced in the virtual community's online discussions. In this sense, the author concludes, the Internet should not be seen as something isolated from the real world in which young people are living; experiences and conceptions about religion, values and ideals, and relations between different groups formed offline play a greater role for their religious identity than their life online.

I have identified three positions, represented by three scholars, regarding the question of whether computer-mediated communication contributes to a fruitful dialogue between religious believers and non-believers, or not. Brasher considers the Internet to

be well suited for inter-religious dialogue, with a great potential to advance a pluralistic and open debate about religious issues. However, since her study, written prior to the fatal events 9/11, essentially lacks concrete observations that substantiate this conclusion it appears to be little more than a pious hope. Lövheim's stance on this new medium is considerably more pessimistic. Her research indicates that online religious communication between believers and non-believers often is very polarized and antagonistic. Finally, I ascribed an intermediate position to Højsgaard since he acknowledges the Internet's constructive role with regard to organized interreligious dialogue (religion-online), while pointing out that conflicts are more prone to crop up in religious interaction of a more coincidental nature (online-religion). Subsequently I will relate my own analysis to these positions.

Debating religion online: A look at a Swedish website

In order to examine the nature of the online debate about religion in Sweden, and particularly the discussions between religious and secular/atheistic actors, I have looked at the discussion groups that deal with religion in the debate forum of one of the most visited Swedish websites, Passagen. Basically I examined the contributions posted on these discussion groups during one month, viz. October of 2008. The first part of the analysis accounts for the frequency by which the various topics of discussion on the site received contributions, while the second part assesses the rhetoric used in the contributions by means of a few examples. The following short presentation of the results is far from exhaustive. However, I consider it suggestive of how engaged people in Sweden currently are in discussions about religion and alternative belief systems such as atheism and secularism. Above all it shows how tense and conflictual the relations between the religious and the secular/atheist worldviews are.

Religion: A popular subject of discussion

Passagen is a Swedish web portal owned by the search company Eniro (Passagen). During the year 2008 Passagen was approximately the 20th most visited website in Sweden (Sveriges Annonser). It also hosts a web community with about 1.2 million registered members. The site provides its members with a large number of services, such as blogs, net dating, chats, web based E-mail, space for homepages and a debate forum. I have focused on Passagen's debate forum, and more precisely on the discussion groups that belong to the debate forum's category «Religion and Belief», thus dedicated to the debating of various religious issues. During the month that I followed the activity on the website it became apparent that «Religion and Belief» is one of the absolutely most popular categories in the debate forum: Of its 34 categories, designated to a wide range of interests, «Religion and Belief» is one of the categories that receives the largest number of contributions.

In order to describe the activity in the discussion groups pertaining to this category an ordinary day, I decided to arbitrarily choose one of the days of October as reference point. I chose the thirtieth day of the month (2008–10–30); as far as I know an entirely

regular day on the site. A total of 1,277 contributions were posted on the 34 categories of the debate forum on this particular day. «Religion and Belief» received the second most contributions of all the categories, viz. 175. It was outnumbered only by «Flirting and Love» in which 267 contributions were posted. Thus the number of contributions posted on «Religion and Belief» was almost five times above the average, which was 38. The pattern of distribution of contributions was fairly constant during the month of study and «Religion and Belief» was always among the categories in which the largest number of contributions was posted; some days it was even the category that received most contributions.

While a total of 175 contributions were posted on «Religion and Belief» on the day mentioned far from all of the 26 different discussion groups within this category received any contributions. A group dedicated to discussions about atheism («Atheism») was the most popular with 65 contributions. In second place with 42 contributions came a group that discussed the Bible («The Bible»), while a group centred on Jesus («Belief in Jesus») came in third place with 37 contributions posted. All in all, contributions were posted on only 8 of the 26 groups on religion: In addition to the three mentioned groups – «Atheism» (65), «The Bible» (42), and «Belief in Jesus» (37) – these were «Catholicism» (10), «Religious Communities» (7), «Baptism» (6), «Scientology» (6), and «Judaism» (2). The other groups did not receive any contributions at all this day.

Roughly the pattern of distribution on this arbitrarily chosen day mirrors that of the month as a whole. The groups in which the highest number of contributions was posted during the month that I followed the discussions were, without much variation, precisely «Atheism», «Belief in Jesus», «The Bible» and also «Religious Communities». With 1,735 contributions posted during October 2008, and thus with an average of 56 contributions a day, «Atheism» was the most popular of the discussion groups; «Belief in Jesus» received 1,627 contributions (52/day); «The Bible» received 968 contributions (31/day); and «Religious Communities» received 794 contributions (26/day). Of the 26 discussion groups in the debate forum's category «Religion and Belief» these four groups were in a class by themselves, with the unquestionably highest grade of activity in «Atheism» and «Belief in Jesus». After these four follows «Evolution vs. Creation» with 392 contributions posted (12/day). It is followed by a cluster of groups with about 140 contributions each (5/day), viz. «Catholicism», «Scientology», and «Livets ord» (on the Swedish Christian congregation with this name). The number of contributions posted on the remaining 18 groups is almost negligible.

My examination of the popular Swedish website Passagen's debate forum shows that relatively many people are engaged in debating religion. The grade of activity in the category «Religion and Belief» is high in comparison with the other 34 categories on the forum, and on its discussion groups dedicated to various aspects of religion hundreds of contributions are posted every day. This corresponds to the observation made earlier that a revival of religion has taken place in contemporary Western society. Even in an allegedly secularized country such as Sweden the interest in religion is currently high, if one should judge from the number of messages posted on this debate forum. Of particular interest is that the discussion group on atheism, «Atheism», evinces the

highest activity of all the 28 groups in «Religion and Belief». Moreover, the thematically related group «Evolution vs. Creation» is also very popular. This circumstance indicates that the debate about the nature, significance and value of religion and religious belief as such is particularly intense.

The conflict concerning religion as reflected in the rhetoric employed in the online debate

A perusal of the contributions in the discussion group substantiates the following assumption: The majority consists of either messages submitted by content providers seemingly motivated by an anti-religious agenda aiming at criticizing religion and religious belief, or messages from religiously motivated users striving to defend their own religious tradition and faith, and/or religion in general. Perhaps the most striking impression conveyed by these messages is that online debate between religious believers and critics more often than not is conducted in a very passionate tone.

The website's archive of debate abounds with examples that demonstrate in full what I have characterized as typical of the online debate in the discussion groups on religion. I will therefore conclude by analyzing a couple of examples from debates initiated during October 2008. Both examples are drawn from the discussion group «Atheism». There are two reasons for this: In the category «Religion and Belief» this group receives most contributions by far; thus it offers a lot of material for analysis. Moreover, and even more importantly, the bulk of this material pertains immediately to the subject under discussion here, i.e. the debate on faith between religious and non-religious actors (although a good deal of such material is to be found also in other groups). The first example represents a debate that commenced on the 31st of October. It continued until the next day and a total of 203 answers, from 21 different contributors (i.e. signatures), followed in response to the opening contribution that triggered the debate, which has the heading «Different glasses» and was posted by the signature «EgonS». This contribution posits a fundamental difference between «atheists» and «believers». Implicitly taking the position of a believer, «EgonS» argues that atheists look upon the world differently than believers do. Being «un-spiritual» and «rational», atheists, in contradistinction to believers, are unable to experience or take pleasure in the beauty of the more sublime dimensions of life, such as art and nature. The atheists are, however, capable of enjoying food and drink, since the experience of eating and drinking is very concrete and connected to the egoistic drives of the human being. Moreover, it is claimed by «EgonS» that «only a believer can feel real emotions», while «the atheist's emotions are more on the level of amoebas». The ability to experience beauty and emotions is said to be a result of the believer's relationship with God, while the «undeveloped spirituality» of the atheist, that exclude «him» from having such experiences, is a «'punishment' for his lack of belief». At the same time, «EgonS» argues that atheists are envious of the security that believers find in their faith. Therefore atheists strive to deprive believers of their faith: «They simply want to take away from us [i.e. the believers] what we have». This makes atheists, «EgonS» concludes, «the helpers of Satan».

By means of oppositions such as spiritual/un-spiritual, spiritual/physical, divine/earthy, emotional/rational, intuition/reason, belief/unbelief, «EgonS» puts forward a dichotomous anthropology in which two different kinds of human beings, the atheist and the believer, is described. These two sorts of humans think, feel, perceive and experience things differently from each other. However, the believer is said to represent a superior life form compared to the atheist, as the experiential and emotional register of the believer is deemed richer and deeper than that of the atheist. Furthermore, the asymmetrical relationship between the atheist and the believer is antagonistic since jealous atheists aim at dragging believers down to their own base level of existence by robbing them of that which ennobles them, i.e. their religious faith.

Reactions against the views of «EgonS» are mainly critical and sometimes fierce. Numerous answers, especially early on in the debate, reject the views professed by «EgonS» with curt comments that often include dismissive and insulting remarks such as «incoherent rubbish» («Randi6»), «superstitious drivle» («macolsson»), «wooliness» («tyren»), «bullshit» («danielirymden»), and «your contribution give us all an excellent example of the narrow-mindedness of Christian fanatics. You express yourself in such a limited, biased, prejudiced, and intolerant way. Is that all you get from your faith? Poor you!» («chanot»). Some answers are more extensive and e.g. signatures «hitchensfan», «danielirymden», «Byfåne» and «chanot» argue in some detail against what is conceived as the generalizing, prejudiced and incorrect assertions of «EgonS». «EgonS» in turn answers the critics, as a rule by further explications about the difference between atheists and believers and sometimes by insults and warnings; for example, addressed to «Grotto»: «Your unbelief is very strong. Maybe stronger than any believer's faith. But you will pay for this on the Last Judgement, be sure of that.» In connection to these comments it should also be noted that both «EgonS» and the signature's opponents frequently quote and refer to the Bible; «EgonS» in order to substantiate his/her opinions, and his/her opponents to show how brutal and primitive the views expressed in the Bible are and how deficient «EgonS»'s knowledge is about what is really written in it. Finally, another interesting point of dispute is whether the principal reason behind what is conceived as an increasing criminality and lack of norms in contemporary society is secularization, which is the opinion of «EgonS», or if the causes of this should be sought elsewhere, which is the view held by most of the other discussants.

«Different glasses» is but one of many similar debates about religion on Passagen's debate forum. It illustrates well the existing tension between religiously motivated and non-religiously motivated Internet users. The discussion about religion and belief that is expressed in this extensive argument is definitely not conducted by the participants in mutual respect for each other's opinions, attitudes and beliefs. On the contrary, it is an extremely polarized discussion that lacks nuance and is often outright hostile. Furthermore, instead of leading to some form of understanding or reconciliation between the conflicting positions the argument rather escalates during the two days that the debate revolves; something that might be illustrated with what «EgonS» writes at a point when this signature has had enough of the debate: «But I think that I end the

debate here. To debate with atheists is like debating with the devil himself. People that are more imbecile and unsympathetic are not easy to find. Thank you!»

My second example is also drawn from the group «Atheism». It consists of a discussion about religiously motivated circumcision and the opening contribution, which was posted by the signature «.....» on the 24th of October 2008, has the heading «Genital mutilation and Circumcision». Upon this contribution followed 11 comments from five different contributors during a period of three days. Like the previous example, «Genital mutilation and Circumcision» is illustrative of the tension between the religious and secularist/atheist worldviews, and it shows how polarized and conflictual the discussion between religious and secular actors can be in online debates. However, it also testifies to how prejudices against ethnic and religious groups conceived as «other» or «foreign» come to expression on the Internet; a phenomenon that is quite common in the context of online discussions in public forums. In this case it is actually possible to speak of contempt and even hate of some religions, viz. Judaism and Islam.

Initially the signature «.....» argues that circumcision of boys is equivalent with genital mutilation and that such «horrible violations of children» ought to be banned immediately. Claiming that circumcision «can go wrong like hell» the signature «.....» connects the practice mainly to Islam by referring to an «ex-Muslim» friend who left Islam because his sexual organs were destroyed during the course of his circumcision. According to «.....» the responsibility for ending this practice rests upon God's «loyal worshiping people» since they have no right to violate children in the name of a covenant commanded by their «bloody fucking» and «false God». However, while explicitly linking circumcision to Islam «.....» also condemns religion in general; this is done in no uncertain terms: «Fuck religion and Fuck God is all I say». Thus it appears that the polemic of «.....» is aimed at religion and religious faith in general, and against Islam in particular. This impression is strengthened by the concluding words of «.....», which expound on the signature's outlook on life: «Humanism and common sense are the catchwords for humanity and not any desert-religious actions that poison humanity.»

All the ensuing comments agree that circumcision implies a violation of the child and the practice is generally repudiated. A discussion then follows about in which religions circumcision is actually decreed. The signature «Byfåne» tries to defend religion in general by claiming that genital mutilation is an invention of deluded humans and that no religion actually prescribes it. However, against this «hitchensfan» argues that at least the Jews, and perhaps also the Muslims, practice circumcision as a result of it being religiously decreed. Thus, writes «hitchensfan», «Byfåne» is wrong. Furthermore «Byfåne» is accused by «hitchensfan» of being unjustifiably sympathetic towards religion, upon which «Byfåne» without reserve acknowledges his/her belief in God. However, to really show that «Byfåne» is mistaken and to substantiate that circumcision is commanded in Jewish religious sources «hitchensfan» supplies a biblical quote from Leviticus 12:3.

Face to face with this scriptural evidence «Byfåne» agrees that circumcision actually is prescribed in Judaism. However, neither of the two discussants is completely

sure whether it is demanded also in Islam and Christianity. At this point a new textual voice appears in the debate, «Sven-J». This signature abolishes the uncertainty by asserting that circumcision is not prescribed in Christianity, adding that circumcision is justified only when conducted for medical reasons. After the clarifying comment of «Sven-J» the debate is concluded by the same signature that started it, i.e. «.....». Agreeing with the previous contributor «.....» explains that while Jesus was against physical circumcision he advocated «The Circumcision of the Heart», adding somewhat surprisingly, in the same sentence, that «Judaism and Islam are the two most repulsive disgusting filthiest religions ever». As if this hostile outburst was not sufficient the signature, almost as an afterthought, adds the following invectives in English: «Fuck Judaism. Fuck Islam.» These few examples of online debate about religion, drawn from Passagen's debate forum, suffice to illustrate my point, I think.

I would argue that at least a couple of conditions have to be fulfilled for a discussion about religion, or indeed almost any subject, to be successful: 1) The participants must conduct their dialogue in mutual respect for each other's opinions and sentiments; and 2) A purpose of the participants for engaging in dialogue ought to be the acquiring of a deeper understanding of the ideas, traditions, practices, motives and values that their discussion partners profess and live by. However, it seems that only rarely are these minimal prerequisites fulfilled in the online debates on religion in the group «Atheism» (or, for that matter, in «Evolution vs. Creation»). On the contrary, the discussions in this group tend not only to be permeated by prejudice and stereotypes but are also often conducted in a very rude language. Verbal abuse is common and the frequency by which ascriptions of negative qualities directed at other discussants, as well as at the religious or non-religious traditions that they adhere to, indicates that the communication here is often aimed at insulting others rather than understanding their viewpoints. It is difficult to see how the heated polemics between, on the one hand, the advocates of religion and, on the other, the critics of religion that come to expression in the messages posted on this discussion group can lead to any substantial understanding between the parts. At the individual level discussions such as these can hardly achieve anything but reinforce already held preconceptions; on the societal level they will most likely only serve to further widen the gap between conflicting positions.

Conclusions

With its point of departure in the notions about, on the one hand, a massive de-secularization of the world and, on the other, a corresponding critical reaction against religion playing an increasing role in contemporary society, this article's main focus has been held on what Helland calls online-religion, that is, forms of computer-generated communication with religious content that are based on the ideals of an open, non-hierarchical and unstructured interaction and thus allows for the participation of the individual users in the production of content, i.e. debate forums, chat-rooms, news groups, E-mail lists etc. Particular attention was given to Sweden, generally considered to be one of the most secularized countries in the world.

The quantitative analysis conducted in the present study offered what I consider to be the most surprising results. To the best of my knowledge no quantitative studies of the activity in the various categories of an open and multi-topical debate forum on the Internet have been made with regard to the Swedish context. However, through my analysis of the frequency with which the various topics on the debate forum of the popular Swedish website, Passagen, received contributions I came to the conclusion that religion was one of the absolutely most debated subjects on the forum. In popularity it came second only to discussions about topics related to «flirting and love». I take this circumstance to be yet an indication that interest in religion currently is very high in Sweden. Equally surprising was that the group called «Atheism», which to a large extent functions as a platform for discussions about religion between religious believers and non-believers, evinced the highest activity of the debate forum's 28 discussion groups dedicated to various aspects of religion.

However, those hoping that the high activity on the forum is a sign of the commitment to engage in constructive religious dialogue would be disappointed. The subsequent, qualitatively oriented, assessment of the rhetoric employed in the posted messages showed that the online discussion tends to be very polarized, replete with stereotypes and prejudices. Verbal abuse is common and recurring flare-ups in many cases effectively hinder any real dialogue from taking place. That is, even though my analysis confirms that people are strongly engaged in discussions about religion and competing belief systems such as atheism and secularism, it also shows how tense and conflict ridden the relations between the religious and the atheist/secular worldviews are in the Western world post-9/11.

The results seem to support the sceptical view on the possibilities of the Internet to advance inter-religious dialogue and understanding evinced by Lövheim, and to some extent also by Højsgaard, rather than Brasher's more optimistic evaluation of the Internet's potential to contribute to what she calls «global fellowship». Additionally, since my focus, in contradistinction to that of Lövheim and Højsgaard, was almost exclusively on the religious debate between believers and non-believers in Sweden, I was able to demonstrate that at least with regard to this particular aspect of online interaction their scepticism was well-grounded. However, further studies are required in order to attain a more comprehensive picture of Internet's role in the contemporary debate on faith between representatives of the religious and the secular/atheist worldviews. It should, nevertheless, be emphasized that computer-generated communication, like all kinds of human communication, is socially situated and that tensions and controversies manifested on the Internet cannot be isolated from tensions and controversies in the «real world». The violent polemics expressed in online discussions between advocates and critics of religion is essentially paralleled in other media and public discourse; it should come as no surprise that the fervent and high-pitched voices by which many authors, scholars, journalists and politicians debate religion at present are reproduced and even reinforced in the mainly open, non-hierarchical and unstructured interaction on the Internet.

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