

*Give Me That Online Religion*, by Brenda E. Brasher

Reviewed by [Mark U. Edwards](#) in the [April 18, 2001](#) issue

Brenda Brasher believes that each generation must articulate ideas of the divine that make sense against the backdrop of its own time. Today's backdrop has been shaped by computers and computer-mediated communication, which have redefined many people's self-understanding and view of community. These changes add up to a "revolution in the making," most clearly expressed in popular and novel forms of online religion.

Along with largely conceptual chapters on presence, time, virtue, vice and human identity in cyberspace, Brasher offers case studies on "cyber-seekers" who find religion through the Internet, often on celebrity sites or on sites that deal in apocalyptic prediction. Her book is rich in intelligent surmise but thin on supporting evidence. A few examples may illustrate the promise that only further research and deeper analysis can realize.

For Brasher "cyberspace" is the imaginative realm that each surfer creates when online. It is a "perpetual present" where "history can vanish in a nanosecond," an "ideal public place for a people [Americans] without history." It also offers "a taste of forever," a place of "sacred time."

Continuously accessible and ostensibly disconnected from the cycles of the earth, cyberspace appeared to its first Western consumers to be a concrete expression or materialization of the monks' concept of eternity. They christened it thus. It is always present. Whatever exists within it never decays. Whatever is expressed in cyberspace, as long as it remains there, is perpetually expressed.

Actually, cyberspace is extraordinarily ephemeral, liable at any moment to go up in electronic smoke, dependent on a fragile technology that becomes obsolete in a few years. Typescript on acid-free paper will last longer than any form of online storage used today; and it will remain legible to humans without technological translation. Even Brasher's disclaimer testifies to the changing nature of the Web: "We know that many of the Websites listed in this book no longer exist. That is the nature of the Web." It is an odd "perpetual presence," an odd "eternity" that passes so quickly.

But perhaps the experience of cyberspace belies this rational calculation. We need more evidence in order to decide.

Another gap between suggestion and evidence is that the three "cyber-seekers" of Brasher's case studies have a more ambiguous relation to Web religion than her conclusion indicates. For the first "cyber-seeker," the Net served as little more than an online travel brochure; it led him to a desert retreat center which took him back to practicing Catholicism. For the second, the Net provided an introductory religious experience from a safe distance. Considering conversion to Judaism, she attended a cyber-Seder and six months later did convert and join a Jewish community. And the third, a lapsed neopagan, revived her religious practice online and was the only one of the three who stayed there. Brasher's conclusion that "online religion is a consequential spiritual practice for a sizable portion of the cyberspace population, a group whose size increases exponentially month by month," may be true, but it certainly needs better empirical grounding.

In one of her two strongest chapters--the other is on three apocalyptic Web sites, including Heaven's Gate--Brasher suggests that the mass media have so eroded the barriers between religion and entertainment that they have enabled celebrity worship to challenge the cultural influence of "priests, rabbis, and other traditional sources of charismatic authority." She illustrates her argument with "memorial sites" dedicated to Princess Diana, a "celebrity altar site" for Keanu Reeves and "community sites" celebrating *Star Trek*. Cyberspace, she thinks, offers traditional religion a unique opportunity to interact with popular religion and perhaps learn "something" from it about what is wrong or unsatisfying in existing religious traditions. It could also teach us something about "the means by which traditional religions could reveal the cracks in new religious systems as they appear." We now need to better nail down what the "something" we might learn is.

Brasher maintains that online religion deserves protection and public support. It is a source of meaning in an age in which computers and computerization are redefining how humans think of themselves. It serves as a counter to market commodification and as a place for "intelligible expression of the transcendent" where humans might directly encounter the divine. It may even lessen religious hostility by making information about different religions broadly available. These are fascinating suggestions, but they need to be more fully explored.