

Tim Hutchings. *Creating Church Online: Ritual, Community and New Media*. New York: Routledge, 2017. 264 pages. \$110.42.

Throughout the history of Christianity, churches have utilized various means of communication to reach out to people and invite them to discipleship—letters, print media, TV, and radio. As the internet has become the primary platform for news, business, education, and relationships, many churches have also turned to cyberspace as a mission field where people can find new faith by engaging in prayer, attending services, or even practicing the sacraments, such as baptism and Eucharist. While digital religions have existed since the 1990s, Tim Hutchings believes that research has not engaged with more in-depth questions, such as why people join online churches, what these churches do, how and why they change over time, and what institutional ties support them. Therefore, Hutchings defines the purpose of his book as to “tease out a more thorough and grounded understanding of what it can mean to be church online” (5).

In chapter 1, Hutchings states that online churches originated as early as the 1980s. He illustrates how churches began to increase their online presence with the advent of the World Wide Web in 1990, by providing “graphics, text and hyperlinks, and online communities” (11). In chapter 2, Hutchings introduces five topics that consistently arise in relation to cyber-churches: the relationship between online and offline activity, the validity of online community, the form and efficacy of online ritual, the design of virtual architecture and sacred space, and the impact of digital media on religious authority. In chapter 3, he discusses the methodology used for his research, namely ethnography. The ethnographer seeks “personal knowledge of what inhabitants do and eventually hopes to learn to see the world as they see it” (52).

Chapters 4 through 8 cover the five online churches that were the subject of Hutchings’s ethnographic research. He collected data on these churches by engaging in online discussion, attending worship, exploring the churches’ online architectures, and interviewing both leaders and participants. Church of Fools, whose main sponsor was a British Methodist, experimented with a new type of church by offering 3D worship services that participants could attend in avatar form. I-Church was part of a diocese of the Church of England that sought to nurture Benedictine spirituality among its participants. Church of Fools eventually relaunched as St. Pixels, which operated independently of denominations. Here, people could not only worship by typing their prayers, but could also share their reflections on blogs or in the forum. The Anglican Cathedral of Second Life appealed to Anglicans who were already familiar with their tradition by recreating the cathedral architecture and using the Anglican liturgy. Finally, Church Online at LifeChurch.tv differed from the other four churches in that it emphasized conversion rather than conversation and controlled the extent of participation.

Chapters 9 and 10 present critical analyses of these case studies, the aim of which is to understand the role of religious institutions in their use of technology. In chapter 9, Hutchings describes the religious-social shaping of technology (or RSST) and the institutional approach to the mediatization of religion. The former emphasizes the “agency of religious designer,” while the latter “conform[s] to a pre-established ‘logic’ of the media.” Hutchings suggests a third way that combines both approaches, which he calls “Mediatized Design.” In chapter 10, Hutchings envisions these online churches as a “third space” in which the participants are positioned between full integration into the religious and social networks and separation from these networks. While negotiating between the religious agencies and expectations of online cultures, online churches provide more options that allow for the users to adjust their commitments.

It is noteworthy that although the Barna group, a Christian polling company, predicted that online churches would gradually replace local congregations (25), the results of Hutchings's research show otherwise. Many participants have added the online churches to their everyday lives while still remaining connected to their local congregations. It seems rare for individuals to find new faith by joining online groups; rather, most of them "had current or past experience of attending a local church" (229). As it is an ethnographic study, it is regretful that Hutchings's work does not proceed to discuss the theological interpretations of such observations or to suggest what actions church communities may need to take.

Hutchings's research was originally conducted for his doctoral dissertation and was later developed into a book. Although his work does not aim to offer practical wisdom regarding how to create online churches, it still poses some challenging questions such as the nature of church, the grace of God in online communities, churches' openness to theological challenge, and their hospitality toward those who cannot physically participate in the life of their local congregation. Although Hutchings limits his research to sociological analysis, this book would be a useful resource for clergy and theologians to reflect on how churches negotiate their identities through their use of media.

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