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Facebook as a Site for Inter-religious Encounters: A Case Study from Finland

RUTH ILLMAN & SOFIA SJÖ

ABSTRACT *The aim of this article is to analyse the social networking site Facebook as a possible platform for inter-religious dialogue. Building on a case study—an attack on a Buddhist temple in Turku, Finland, and the consequent interaction that took place online immediately following the attack—the article investigates the strengths and limitations of social networking sites such as Facebook for encountering and connecting with religious others. The ethnographic material—consisting of both Internet material and interviews with concerned parties—is discussed in close connection with current research on religion, social media, and discussions online. Themes that are highlighted include stereotypes and superficiality as assumed aspects of online conversations, the role of power in dialogue—both offline and online, and symbolic communicative actions and social networking sites.*

Introduction

Research into digital forms of religion—often referred to as digital religion—is currently a topical issue (Ahlbäck; Campbell; Cheong et al.). Despite this growing interest, the Internet has so far received marginal attention within the research on inter-religious relations and dialogue. Traditionally, inter-religious dialogue has mainly been studied from a rational perspective, comparing theological claims and the work of official expert groups. Practical, political, and aesthetic dimensions of dialogue have rarely been analysed, as research has mostly focused on the narrow view of dialogue as a problem of incompatible belief systems (Barnes 412). Today, however, such approaches are increasingly criticised for their inability to account for other aspects of human religiosity than the purely intellectual. Thus, a growing number of studies now opt for other trajectories, approaching the subject from alternative angles such as the aesthetic, spiritual or mystical (Cornille, “Empathy”; Cheetham; Illman, *Art*). Other topical issues relate to practical aspects of living together in a multi-religious world. The impact of political agendas and power structures is also increasingly highlighted (Amir-Moazami). Hence, questions of power are central to dialogue research today, mirroring significant changes in views of both religion and dialogue (Leirvik 23).¹

As a contribution to the discussion of dialogue beyond the dichotomies of intellectual–emotional, personal–political, and spiritual–practical, we take an interest in inter-religious encounters as they take form on the social networking site Facebook. Inter-religious dialogue is often described as a sincere and reciprocal endeavour. Anne Hege Grung, for example, defines

dialogue as “a mutual encounter between equal parties, without hidden agendas, not aiming at transforming the other but at taking part in a mutual transformation that may happen through the encounter” (59). Can forums for entertainment and social networking online match such profound criteria?

The aim of this article is to analyse Facebook as a possible platform for inter-religious encounters, by focusing on a case study relating to a series of events in our home town of Turku, Finland. On 11 September 2010, the Vietnamese Buddhist temple, still under construction in the outskirts of the city, was vandalised by a fire. The members of the community soon drew the conclusion that this was a case of arson—a hate crime intended to desecrate the temple (Martikainen 80). It was not the first time that the Lotus Hearts Temple was attacked, but it was by far the most serious event. The aggression directed towards the Buddhist community received vast media attention all over the country. However, the chain of events that unfolded *after* the attack was in some ways even more notable, an especially interesting feature being the visible role played by social media.

Before politicians, researchers, and other officials had time to react, a solidarity group for the Buddhists in Turku was established by an anonymous private person on Facebook. Within days, this group gathered more than 3,000 members, many of whom belonged to minority groups in the Finnish society (Illman, “Mångfald”). This group quickly emerged as a forum for dialogue that was to be taken seriously, setting aside the conventional forms and hierarchies of official inter-religious relations in Finland.²

The reactions to the attack on the Buddhist temple in Turku imply a number of relevant changes in contemporary views and practices of inter-religious encounters, one of the most striking being the forum chosen for dialogue. To underline the increasing importance of social media in interpersonal communication might be a worn-out argument, but in this particular case its impact cannot be ignored. The Facebook group, along with some other online communities, constituted the space in which dialogue on religious values and multicultural society actually took place. To understand this dialogue, the context must, however, be clarified.

The Finnish Context

The religious landscape of Finland, with its population of 5.4 million inhabitants, is rather homogeneous. The country has two national churches, the Evangelical-Lutheran Church (75.4% of the population are members) and the Greek Orthodox Church (counting 1.1% of the population as its members). In addition, other Christian denominations share a few percent of the population. The Jewish community has approximately 1,200 members and the number of Muslims in Finland is estimated to be 35,000. Fourteen percent of the Finnish population have no official religious affiliation. Despite the significant degree of membership in, above all, the Lutheran church, the country at large is highly secularised (Ketola 346; “Uskonnot Suomessa”). Most Finns thus find it natural to belong to the church for historical and social reasons while harbouring no personal religious convictions. The Vietnamese community started to take form in the late 1980s with the arrival of refugees,

both Catholic and Buddhist. Today, the Vietnamese Buddhists amount to approximately 3,000 members and 10% of these live in the Turku area (Martikainen 79). The Vietnamese Buddhist community was officially established in 1998 and work on building the temple started soon after this date (“Uskonnot Suomessa”).

Due to the country’s rather mono-religious history, dialogue efforts have been quite rare and recent in Finland. Since the early twentieth century, ecumenical dialogues have been arranged between Christians of different denominations, but the first steps towards truly inter-religious dialogue were taken by the Lutheran church when it established working groups for dialogue with Jews in 1977 and with Muslims in 1988 (Illman, “Mångfald”). In the aftermath of the events of 9/11, the urgency of dialogue was brought to public attention and a number of dialogue groups were established. Today, the most comprehensive official forum is “USKOT-foorumi” which gathers representatives of the Abrahamic religions (“USKOT-foorumi”).³ Local dialogue initiatives at grassroots level can also be found, but most of these have not included the Vietnamese Buddhist community, which has kept a rather low profile. This makes the case we are interested in here even more noteworthy.

Methods

Keeping in mind that what researchers regard as ideals for communication online and the research participants’ ideals might not be the same (Stromer-Galley and Wichowski), the need actually to talk to the people taking part in discussions online becomes pertinent. Consequently, our case study is based on a mixed-method approach, combining research on the activities of a particular Facebook group with interviews conducted with concerned parties involved in the discussions. The data from the Facebook group were downloaded and printed in sequential screenshots in order to preserve the original structure of the discussion. Approximately 70 entries were posted, some of them receiving up to 20 comments and several hundred ‘likes’. The semi-structured, open-ended interviews were carried out with seven individuals who were either moderators of the Facebook group, members of the Vietnamese Buddhist community or representatives of other religious communities that posted official statements on the web forum. We were particularly interested in how these persons comprehended the site and the activity on the site and what it meant to them. Our methodological approach to interviewing sought to create a “listening space” in the interview situation, where meaning is co-created for research purposes (Kvale and Brinkmann 2; Miller and Crabtree 185, 188). For detailed information on the interviews, see Appendix 1.

The importance of the Internet as an arena where worldviews are accumulated, assessed, and shared steadily increases as a growing number of people seek moral and spiritual guidance online (Partridge 125–6). Therefore, the relevance of social media for contemporary inter-religious relations must not be disregarded. However, the fact that, in this case, the dialogue took place online presents its own challenges. To be able better to comprehend the

empirical case study, it is discussed in close connection with current research on religion, social media, and discussion online. However, the focus will be on the specific case. For a thorough introduction to the two fields that the study combines—digital religion and inter-religious dialogue—we encourage the readers to acquaint themselves with the literature in our list of references. The study has been conducted as part of the extensive research project on contemporary religiosity in Finland—“Post-secular Culture and a Changing Religious Landscape in Finland” (“PCCR”)—at Åbo Akademi University in Turku.

Understanding Social Media

As indicated above, research into digital religion is very much on the current research agenda and several studies on the subject have been published (Ahlbäck; Campbell; Cheong et al.). One of the most comprehensive volumes so far is *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* edited by Heidi Campbell. This volume highlights the main issues and perspectives that concern the field, such as questions of identity, community, and authority, and illustrates its development from a general fascination with the novelty of the Internet to a more complex exploration of questions of methods and theory. The volume, together with other publications on this topic, also illustrates that developments related to what is usually referred to as Web 2.0 are inspiring research in particular. However, as Pauline Hope Cheong and Charles Ess have argued, the development of Web 2.0 has not entailed a radical revolution, as some researchers expected, but it has transformed and changed many practices, beliefs, and structures relating to religion as well as other aspects of society (Cheong and Ess 1–2).

Web 2.0 denotes the more interactive character of many aspects of the Internet today, including—among other things—social media. The term ‘social media’ usually refers to sites that allow users to produce and share content and create networks. These include social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, on which we focus here, Twitter, and Instagram. Currently, a great deal of research is conducted on social media in general and how religion and social media interrelate. As Nancy Baym has illustrated and similar to other aspects of the Internet, one can observe great varieties in the use of SNSs depending on the cultural context one is studying. Which SNSs are popular differs according to which geographical area one looks at and SNSs are used in different ways depending on the cultural context.

Internet use is prevalent in Finland. A study carried out in 2010 showed that every second Finn uses the Internet several times a day and over 40% were registered on a SNS (Official Statistics of Finland). Regarding our case, it is also worth noting that Facebook in Finland is the SNS that far outnumbers any other SNSs in popularity (Ridell). Thus the fact that the group which is the focus of this article was created on Facebook is not a surprise, nor is the attention the site inspired, but the special features of this site and how it is used more generally, and in Finland in particular, become essential questions.

When studying the Internet, understanding features of particular sites is necessary, since the form of the site shapes what takes place there (see Sjö).

What then characterises Facebook? Research shows that the site is used for getting in touch with and keeping in touch with people. However, Facebook does not seem to foster new relationships. It is rather used to articulate and maintain existing relationships (Ridell; Lomborg and Ess). It has been argued that the site offers great social capital, particularly bridging capital (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe), but this bridging has largely been shown to concern networks people are already part of. For those outside these networks, Facebook is therefore not necessarily a way in (Baym). Facebook thus allows people to connect with people they know, but it does not necessarily inspire connections outside people's own social groups. However, the site does allow individuals to create and join groups for special interests. In our case, this feature is of particular interest and we shall return to it shortly, but first we need to discuss some theoretical perspectives on how to comprehend Facebook, particularly in a Finnish context.

Visibility and Connection

One of the most extensive studies of Facebook use in Finland has been done by Seija Ridell. Her study is based on a survey on Internet use that provided particular information about Facebook. Ridell discusses why Facebook has become so popular and she presents both the positive and the negative aspects of the site expressed by users. The simplicity of joining Facebook is often stated but also the feel of a certain social pressure to be a member or otherwise be left out (Ridell 70). The site offers the possibility to connect and a sense of ease in this connection, both stated as benefits of the site (*ibid* 75); however, users also express concern with the shallowness that they consider that the site inspires (*ibid* 105). Building on Hanna Arendt, Ridell states that the site can be theorised as a public space, but only in the sense of a space where one sees others and where one is seen by them, not in the sense of a space for collective discussion and problem solving (Ridell 90). Ridell does not dwell on the concept of public space, but her reflections could well be connected to more thorough theorising of the field (see Lövheim and Axner). For our purpose, however, what is of more interest is how her findings relate to ours.

The typical features of Facebook as theorised by Ridell can also be related to the Facebook material analysed for this article. It is clear that the solidarity group initiated on Facebook gave this particular dialogue process an unprecedented visibility in the public sphere in Finland. The media coverage of the event often made the Facebook group the main feature of the news stories. Another aspect adding to the visibility of the attack was probably the fairly positive image of the Vietnamese community among many Finns. Although Finland has not been spared from hate crimes in the past, the small community of Vietnamese Buddhists has seldom been targeted (Ketola 293). Therefore, the news coverage of the attack was extensive and a number of politicians, researchers, and religious authorities joined the public discussion. Most Finnish newspapers are now available online, offering their readers the possibility to comment on news stories, either anonymously or with a signature. Articles concerning the attack on the Buddhist temple gave rise to

heated debates on subjects ranging from freedom of religion and immigration to police work and juvenile delinquency. However, the Facebook group did not inspire such heated debate, only short exclamations of sympathy or 'likes'. Thus, it illustrates Ridell's description of Facebook as a public space where one sees others and where one is seen by them, but where one does not necessarily engage deeply with these others. The case we are studying could also be tied in with the notion of the 'third spaces' of digital religion discussed by Stewart Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi, which is presented as a way of theorising alternative spaces available on the Internet from where actions can spill over into the offline world. However, since the reactions which the Facebook group inspired were noteworthy from an inter-religious dialogue point of view, but did not have that far-reaching consequences, and, as we show below, were questioned by some, the concept of 'third spaces' will be left out of the discussion here.

As is often the case in analyses of SNSs (see Gruzd, Wellman and Takhteyev), Ridell also uses the theory of an imagined community to capture the connection that is felt by those using the site. Building on this concept she turns to Donald Horton and Richard Wohl's theory of para-social interaction (Ridell 75–6). Para-social interaction denotes the idea of intimacy at a distance and has been used to theorise the way viewers can feel connected with TV performers (Horton and Wohl; Handelmann). Used in relation to Facebook, the theory highlights, perhaps again, the shallowness of the possible connections, but also the feeling of connectedness and interaction that this site may nevertheless entail.

The question of shallowness pointed out above seems to be an ambiguous feature in our research material. In relation to the questions of sincerity posed above, it is important to note that not only private persons joined the solidarity group on Facebook, but also, for example, local religious organisations took part in the virtual dialogue. The first two groups to post official statements condemning the violence and supporting the Buddhists were the Islamic Community of Turku and the Finnish Pagan Network. "The only way to prevent such hostility in the future is to engage in inter-religious dialogue", the neo-pagans stated (Finnish Pagan Network). The Islamic Community of Turku used even stronger words in their statement. "We are shocked by this appalling crime", the declaration proclaimed, "persecution against religions cannot be accepted in any form, and we want to let our Buddhist brothers and sisters know that they are not alone in these difficult times" (Islamic Community of Turku).

Nevertheless, the solidarity group on Facebook did not give rise to any in-depth conversations and some of the interviewees thus dismissed it as unimportant and superficial. The Lutheran Reverend Urho had forgotten all about it and expressed rather sceptical views of online dialogue in general, describing the Internet as a "wild world" where it is "perhaps even a bit too easy" to express ill-considered views and passions. Similarly, the politician Elli only had a vague idea about the Facebook group, but still recognized its importance for the current event. The researcher Iiro shared the view of Facebook as being shallow, although he underlined the importance of the Internet in general for inter-religious conversation, especially among youth who were "raised on online media". He described Facebook as a "hot topic"

that interests the media, something that could boost the confidence of the Vietnamese community—but only temporarily.

However, it can be noted that the sympathy and solidarity channelled to the Buddhist community via the Facebook group was not trivialised by other interviewees but rather perceived as a weighty and valid form of support. “Facebook is what counts today”, said Aino, who posted an official statement of sympathy on behalf of the Finnish neo-pagan network. “A Facebook group will hardly change the world in any radical way”, she continued, “but it is a good channel for information that can facilitate community and create connections at a grassroots level that will make a difference in real life.” A similar point was made by one of the moderators of the Facebook group, Osmo, who said that, although the content on Facebook usually amounts to comments rather than conversations, they could still be of value. In his view, the sympathy conveyed to the Vietnamese Buddhists via Facebook was “if not practical then at least moral support”, giving the community a chance to express sympathy towards and awareness of their situation. Yrjö, the other moderator of the Facebook group, found it extremely interesting that Facebook became such a central aspect of this case. Being an entrepreneur working with social media, he saw Facebook as a forum for creating contacts “organically”—meaning naturally and easily—between people from different contexts. In his view, this kind of support was a worthwhile option. Drawing parallels with the situation of his own Muslim community in Turku, he concluded that if they had a similar solidarity group on Facebook, counting 3,000 members, that would mean the world to them.

The Buddhist community also valued the support expressed on Facebook. The community member Ahti explained that he was “astonished but grateful for having so many cyberfriends”. He found it hard to relate to this rather abstract form of support and seemed to value the articles published in the printed media more, but he noted that the virtual support had many beneficial consequences for the community and that the young members highly appreciated it. Consequently, Eero, a younger member of the community, regarded the 3,000 members on Facebook as a very empowering reaction and real support. He was even surprised at our questioning the relevance of this kind of support, replying: “Of course it is important; it felt like getting 3,000 hugs! It would be terrible to be alone in this situation.”

Symbolic Communicative Acts on Facebook

The possibility to create groups on Facebook and how to understand these groups is an understudied area, but some noteworthy insights have been offered. In Ridell’s study, the possibility to create groups on Facebook is seen as a positive feature as well as a problem. The problem is connected to the debate in the media at the time about the study of racist groups that had been exposed and the possibility of the site to allow such groups to exist, although they are regularly closed down when their existence comes to light. However, the possibility to create groups is considered beneficial when it allows people to organise and connect with like-minded people. Many people who took part in Ridell’s study were members of Facebook groups. However, it is

noteworthy that very few took an active part in these groups or considered them to be good sites for discussions (Ridell 51–2), a relevant issue that others have highlighted as well.

In his study of religious groups on Facebook, Mark Johns particularly noticed the passivity of most members. Johns focused on seven different religious groups representing different faith traditions. All of them were quite large with several thousand, in some cases, several hundred-thousand members. However, during the time that the groups were observed, the activity on the pages was rather limited or, in other words, the number of members participating in discussions was small. Also, several groups had problems with harassment and attacks by members who did not seem to have joined for the sake of supporting the group. Johns's study does not support the idea of Facebook—or Facebook groups—as sites for interaction and connection. However, he contends that these groups may function as symbolic communicative acts. According to Johns, “these communicative acts are not being directed at other group members. Instead, these communicative acts are directed externally, to those outside the group” (163), that is to say, to the person's friends who can see information about which groups that person has joined. This highlights the complex nature of many aspects of the Internet and the way the idea of what is public and what is private has to be re-negotiated (see Gurak and Antonijevic).

Returning to the particular Facebook group under study here, it can be said to fit the description offered by Ridell and Johns. Most of the 3,000 members were indeed passive, posting only one or a few short comments expressing their indignation about the attack and their support and sympathy for the Buddhists. Thus, these scant online encounters can in no comprehensible way be said to represent dialogue in the sense of sharing and jointly pondering fundamental values and beliefs. Johns's suggestion that such memberships seem to bear significance on another level, as symbolic communicative acts, nevertheless seems highly relevant in the current case. People did not only seem to join the group as a symbolic gesture towards others, to mark their identity and the values they wished to associate themselves with in public. Taking into account the complex public/private nature of, for example Facebook groups, such symbolic acts can also be turned inwards, towards the self, as a manifest way of drawing the limits of selfhood in a personal process of creating meaning. Joining a group on Facebook is indeed done in the blink of an eye, but it need not always be regarded as a shallow and passing whim.

In the interviews, many appreciative evaluations of Facebook were given—not in spite of, but rather because of the rapidity and short format of the interactions in this medium: Eero described it as a “democratic channel”, Aino pointed to its ability to “facilitate conversations on grassroots level”, and Osmo discussed its role as a provider of “sympathy and moral support”. Many interviewees acknowledged that joining the Facebook group and giving voice to their opinions relieved the despair they felt after the attack, creating the sense that they had at least done something. Yrjö, for example, described his reactions as being “shaken” and “shocked”. By becoming the moderator of the Facebook group, he had the possibility to turn inwards and ease his own mind while also turning outwards, conveying a positive image of Islam to others: “My religion requires of me that I defend other people's rights to practise their

religion any way they want to, in peace. It's not a question of me being nice or scoring points for myself. Islam requires me to do it. [...] And the point is also that Muslims need to be seen defending other people much more often." The symbolic edge surrounding acts such as joining a Facebook group can thus furnish the interviewees with much greater depth and relevance than meets the eye at first glance: it is, after all, a more active and daring alternative to doing nothing at all.

It is perhaps not surprising that there does not seem to be much communication or community activity going on in the large groups studied by Johns. As others have pointed out (see Hutchings), the size of groups matters and even the concept of group can in many cases be misleading when researchers are dealing with Facebook, as these can often be better understood as networks, with loose ties between members. However, the fact that people choose to become members is still of interest, since it highlights affirmation, although interaction is lacking. The question of how Facebook groups can work as sites for dialogue therefore still stands. Studies of dialogue on the Internet more generally—both inter-religious dialogue and other cross-difference enterprises—can help highlight what is needed for Facebook groups to succeed as sites for dialogue.

Inter-religious Dialogue on Facebook

In the early days of Internet research, great hopes were attached to the ability of the Internet to support and inspire inter-religious dialogue (see Brasher). Subsequent research has shown that the risks are perhaps greater than they were at first perceived. Numerous studies illustrate that conflicts both inside and between religious groups and individuals thrive online (see Lövheim). The problem seems to lie in the fact that the web is highly personalised and that it easily leads to fragmentation. Individuals decide themselves which sources of information they use and they tend to look for information that will reinforce their beliefs rather than challenge them (Fischer-Nielsen and Gelfgren). However, the Internet is not one and the same and there are possibilities for communication and dialogue under the right circumstances.

Research on political conversation in particular has highlighted what is needed for dialogue on the Internet to be constructive. When focusing on social networking sites as discussion forums, the safety of the site and the presence of a moderator seem to be central. Dialogue can often be generated on sites where the identities of the members are known, when a common interest is clearly defined, and particularly if the number of members is limited. This is also the case when religious topics are discussed (see Sjöborg). The presence of an active moderator is central to keeping the discussions on topic and to avoiding negative behaviour. It is also the case, as a lot of research has shown, that groups whose members are in some sense exposed in society are often more vulnerable to negative behaviours online such as 'flaming' and 'trolling' (see Stromer-Galley and Wichowski).

Although the Facebook group studied in this article had three fairly active moderators, cultural stereotypes well-known from both online and offline discourses on religious minorities and immigrants in Finland did flourish. In

the Facebook group, Buddhism was repeatedly characterised as “a religion of peace that respects everyone” and Buddhists were described as “non-violent”, “loving and compassionate”, “hardworking and honest”. The declaration of solidarity posted by the Muslim Community of Turku was met with several contemporary clichés about Islam. The moderator felt compelled to remove some of the fiercest replies: “This is a site for solidarity with the Buddhists, not a forum for criticising other religions”, the convener Osmo stated as a comment to a discussion where peace-loving and discreet Buddhists were juxtaposed with the “violent terrorists” and “fundamentalists” of other faiths. Osmo clarified this point further in the interview: in his opinion, some comments in the group could be interpreted as implicitly hostile towards Muslims, but only one entry explicitly attacking Islam as a religion was actually removed. In his opinion, anti-Muslim activists would take any chance to defame their target and thus many comments were intended to criticise Islam rather than genuinely support the Buddhists in Turku.

This assessment was shared by several other interviewees: “People never change”, Aino from the neo-pagan group stated with a sigh, “new media just make it easier to put your opinions out there.” Many interviewees pointed to similar stereotypical images in the Facebook group and on the Internet at large: religions of the East are seen in a positive light as humble, spiritual, wise, and ecological, while the Abrahamic faiths are seen as old-fashioned, dogmatic, and violent. Eero, a member of the Buddhist community, was deeply worried about the juxtaposition of Buddhist “good guys” and Muslim “bad guys” and saw it as a threat to the newly established network between the religious minorities in the city. This point was also raised by Yrjö, a member of the Muslim community of Turku: “It is much easier for them to get sympathies than for us”, he contended, referring to general stereotypes of Buddhists and Muslims.

Old Stereotypes but New Power Structures

Stereotyping is a common problem in Web-based discussions, a finding with which our study concurs. However, our study also highlights other central themes. In our view, the most interesting of these themes is power: an aspect that is also highlighted in both contemporary research on inter-religious encounters (Leirvik) and research into digital religion (Cheong).

The unfolding of events around the fire at the Buddhist temple challenged the conventional power-base of inter-religious dialogue in Finland in a remarkable way. As mentioned above, the Evangelical-Lutheran church had previously orchestrated most dialogue initiatives in Finland. In the words of Urho, the Lutheran minister interviewed for this study, it is a role that naturally falls to the Lutheran church, which needs to be taken seriously. No matter how sensitively the Lutheran church uses its substantial majority position, however, it inevitably has the strongest influence on the dialogue agenda in Finland. Structured, state or church initiated, talks between representatives of different religions often strengthen existing hierarchies; established routines for setting the agenda, selecting participants, and controlling the conversation are hard to set aside. Despite best intentions to be

inclusive, inequalities are reinforced rather than suspended (Amir-Moazami 7, 13). Nevertheless, this traditional balance of powers was shaken in the current case study. Facebook offered a forum where Buddhists, Neo-pagans, and Muslims—small religious minorities in Finnish society—could establish a relationship with one another without the mediation of either the state or the Lutheran church.

Returning to our interviews, many of those involved in the events around the Buddhist temple pointed to the redistribution of power and influence as the truly innovative and promising effects of Facebook, even if the content of the discussions left much to be desired. Ahti, from the Buddhist community, described how surprised and intrigued he was when noticing that different religious minority groups had joined their cause online—groups with whom they had no previous “real life” co-operation. Similarly, he took note of the many “regular Finns” who were joining the group, that is, Finns without any outspoken religious affiliation or agenda. Such individuals scarcely take part in traditional dialogue events, he commented. His fellow Buddhist Eero agreed, calling Facebook a democratic channel where people can have their voices heard. Furthermore, Ahti argued that the Facebook event had also influenced the power distribution within the Vietnamese Buddhist community, raising the reputation and influence of the young members who have been educated in Finland, who know how that society works, and who, above all, know their way around the Internet. However, Eero, himself one of the young people orchestrating the new opening of the community, was much more vague in his assessment of the internal changes initiated by the Facebook event. In his opinion, the hierarchy between the young and the elders of the community, between inexperienced and wise, should not be blurred: young people should be given opportunities, but they should not question the authority of the elders. Iiro, who observed the event from the position of the migration researcher, also highlighted the changes in the power structure of the community caused by the attack and the subsequent Facebook mass event. This has been a tough lesson for the community, he claimed: the young have seen the realities of the world and know that they have to start turning outwards, to the surrounding community, instead of inwards and just keeping to themselves. For Iiro, Facebook was emblematic of this development.

For Aino from the neo-pagan network, Facebook offered a way to get into the dialogue arena in the first place, as her community is usually not counted among the ‘established traditions’ that are invited to official dialogue events. She acknowledged this fact in the interview and credited Facebook for getting rid of many “gatekeepers” that control the traditional public space. Nevertheless, she also described the hegemony of Facebook as another form of gate-keeping that, she hoped, would break down as new social media platforms take up the competition. Similar observations were made by Yrjö who predicted that we would see a rise in the use of social media among religious minorities who are tired of keeping a low profile and want to make their claims and wishes heard in a plural society. The new social media are thus assessed as having power, both within communities and in the contact between them: questioning old hierarchies and developing new, alternative hierarchies. Similar themes have been highlighted in previous research (Cheong).

Conclusion

In our case study, Facebook seems to present a visible challenge to the conventional routines and hierarchies of inter-religious relations. Within the research on inter-religious dialogue, the traditional perspectives focusing on cognitive contents are now countered by new critical and less normative approaches, envisioned through, for example, feminist critiques and hermeneutic discourses integrating emotions, values, and action into their scopes (see Grung). Dialogue is no longer constructed merely on an abstract meta-level, as a meeting of theoretically and historically fixed traditions, but also as a social and spiritual encounter between human beings, joining in tangible action, for example, against discrimination or environmental threats (Cornille, *Companion*). Dialogues characterised by openness, reciprocity, and respect are also increasingly enacted online. Furthermore, as argued above, questions of representation, legitimacy, power, and agency are increasingly raised in response to official dialogue forums that are criticised for trying to tone down religious difference and making it harmless (Amir-Moazami 13). Consequently, the notion of dialogue is becoming increasingly ambiguous.

Dialogue now inevitably becomes what Michael Hogue calls a “cross-difference enterprise” where voices from actors with various connections, believers and atheists, conservatives and liberals are engaged and where different kinds of questions are addressed: traditionally religious but also social, moral, and political questions. Such enterprises call for constructive and serious engagement with specific traditions, coupled with the recognition that “religious traditions are increasingly porous, religious identities are increasingly permeable, the moral world is increasingly vulnerable, and normative religious claims are increasingly fragile” (Hogue 353).

Who should represent whom in inter-religious encounters in this situation and on what grounds? How should the encounters between people of different religious backgrounds take form and what should be the goal of the engagement in dialogue? These are all increasingly problematic questions in contemporary research on inter-religious encounters. Our study of dialogues on Facebook seems to support the proposition by Oddbjørn Leirvik that the issues of power and reciprocity are among the most urgent questions at stake in contemporary research on inter-religious relations (19).

The Facebook forum succeeded in engaging new voices in the dialogue, thus challenging the established, institutionalised powers, but it failed to break down the power of cemented clichés. This suggests the conclusion that, in order to rethink the role of the Internet—and especially Facebook—as a space for inter-religious encounters, it is vital to acknowledge the intimate intermingling of dialogue and power. As an aspect of dialogue, power relates to political and institutional representation as well as to gendered and ethnic differences in individual access to power. Therefore, encountering others across perceived lines of difference is always a complex process without ready-made answers or clear-cut action plans. This is also reflected in our use of the Internet.

Even if Facebook as a dialogue arena reproduced much of the traditional stereotypes and dualistic arguments characteristic of more traditional inter-religious discourses, it can still be seen to have brought a breath of fresh air to the debate on inter-religious encounters in Finland. By entering Facebook, this

particular dialogue stepped out of the established routines of organised encounters, thus acquiring a more participatory and experimental character. However, while dismantling the forms and norms of the traditional dialogue establishment, it simultaneously stepped into a disruptive and sometimes insincere space of confrontation. As demonstrated, greater diversity in conversation partners and modes of expression does not automatically lead to greater nuance and increased awareness in the conversation itself; prior limitations to dialogue were not overcome. The question arises, however: are any other routes viable in the contemporary—globalised and mediated—landscape of post-secular value negotiations? Looking to the future, it seems probable that by engaging new voices in the conversation, the Internet will bring about an alteration of the balance and focus of inter-religious encounters. It remains to be seen whether this will be a more equal and inclusive balance.

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NOTES

1. The scope of this article does not allow us to give a detailed overview of inter-religious dialogue theory, but comprehensive presentations and discussions can be found in e.g. Cornille (*Companion*) and Illman (*Art*).
2. The group "Turun Buddhalaiستemppelin Solidaarisuusryhmä" is open to all Facebook users. The short English introduction states: "A Buddhist temple has been under construction for years in Turku. The work has been done mostly by volunteers and on [sic] donated money. But during the entire building process, the site has been a target of vandalism, culminating in the recent attempted arson. The destruction has caused grief in the Finnish Vietnamese community, and others in the country. This group is a politically and religiously neutral solidarity group that supports the rights and efforts of the Finnish Vietnamese community to build their long waited [sic] place of worship. We condemn all attacks on peaceful practise [sic] of religion."
3. USKOT-foorumi states that its purpose is to "contribute to an ordered society with a spirit that promotes religious freedom through inter-religious dialogue, equality, mutual respect and cooperation." (USKOT-foorumi)

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Interviews

The interviews were conducted in Finnish or Swedish; they were recorded and later transcribed into text documents. The transcripts are stored in the Folkloristic Archive at Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland. The English quotes in this article have been translated by the authors. The names given to the interviewees in this article are common Finnish names.

“Ahti.” 24 March 2011.

“Aino.” 26 May 2011.

“Eero.” 20 April 2011.

“Elli.” 22 June 2011.

“Iiro.” 26 May 2011.

“Osmo.” 30 May 2011.

“Urho.” 6 June 2011.

“Yrjö.” 15 June 2011.

Appendix 1.

Name	Gender	Born	Occupation	Attachment to the event
Ahti	M	1959	Yoga teacher, social worker	Vice-President of the Vietnamese Buddhist Community in Turku
Eero	M	1986	university student of biotechnical sciences	member of the board of the Vietnamese Buddhist Community in Turku
Aino	F	1983	journalist, university student of media studies	information officer of the Finnish Pagan Network <i>Pakanaverkko</i> ; posted statement of solidarity from her network to the Buddhists
Iiro	M	1948	Director of the Institute of Migration in Turku	researcher of migration and immigration, happens to live close to the temple
Osmo	M	1986	university student of Comparative Religion	Moderator of the solidarity group in Facebook; member of the Orthodox Church of Finland; calls himself “humanist scholar, mystical esotericist, neo-chartalist, pacifist” on Twitter
Urho	M	1953	minister in the Evangelical-Lutheran Church	at the time of the attack, reverend in the Lutheran parish in the area of Turku where the Buddhist temple is located
Yrjö	M	1980	digital researcher and consultant, social entrepreneur	member of the Islamic community of Turku, moderator of the solidarity group on Facebook, posted statement of solidarity from his community to the Buddhists
Elli	F	1948	politician, member of the Conservative Party (Kokoomus)	former member of the Finnish Parliament, former Finnish Minister of Social Affairs and Health, several leading positions in the City Council of Turku