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**Texting Tolerance: Computer-Mediated Interfaith Dialogue****[Ally Ostrowski](#)**

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**Abstract**

*As religious unrest and tension rise throughout the world, facilitating interfaith dialogue has become more important than ever. Many religious organizations have begun to include interfaith discourse into their general religious programming for members and some hold regular dialogue groups for their local population. But face to face events tend to focus only on the local community, excluding distant others who also seek to participate in interreligious discourse. The Internet, therefore, is an important medium to utilize for interfaith dialogue, and can bring isolated people together to discuss issues of difference and faith. This project finds that online interfaith information is excellent for congregations to utilize because of the relatively anonymous nature of the Internet, the disappearance of proximity limitation, the ability to become close with other participants, access to a spectrum of people who practice a particular religion, and the extra time available to ponder moderator questions and previous discussions. Using the Internet for interfaith dialogue is an important step for religious institutions and congregations. Not only are they reaching to their own members through cyberspace, but also reaching the larger population, sharing their range of religious beliefs, and participating in a global effort to improve tolerance and understanding between religious practitioners.*

**Keywords**

*Interfaith dialogue; Online; Religion; Interreligious discourse; Dialogue; Internet*

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**Introduction**

Millions of people access information via the Internet each day. A good portion of these Internet users participate in chat rooms or other types of interactive communicative sessions with other individuals. However, very few religious organizations, institutions, and congregations take advantage of new media for enhancing communication between members and between groups of differing religious traditions. Through a content analysis of religious organizations, institutions, and congregations, only 13% of the 60 websites sampled included any reference or resources for interfaith dialogue (Ostrowski, 2006). A subsequent survey was given to these organizations and showed that while few included interreligious information on their website nearly all who responded held face to face interfaith events and often even participated in interfaith sessions on a national level. So why do religious institutions and congregations refrain from utilizing the Internet to promote discourse between people of differing religious traditions? How can the online

medium be used effectively to enhance the interactivity and efficacy of interreligious discourse? This paper will explore the enhancements and potential drawbacks of online interfaith dialogue and explains the ways in which religious organizations can benefit from incorporating interfaith dialogue (IFD) resources into their own presence on the World Wide Web, based upon work with the interfaith dialogue forums on Beliefnet.

Beliefnet ([www.beliefnet.com](http://www.beliefnet.com)) is the largest spiritual website, begun in 2000 by Steven Waldman, a former editor ([Dart & Allen, 2000](#)) and has over 3.1 million unique monthly visitors ([Beliefnet, 2006b](#)). In 2001, Beliefnet started a series of interfaith dialogue forums as an experiment. Judging from their continued presence five years later, it can be called a successful experiment. There were six forums initially, and each had its own unique group of participants; everyday users of Beliefnet who were interested in talking about different aspects of religion with other participants. Each forum was led by a different moderator, and moderators were invited by Beliefnet to participate based upon their personal experience with interfaith dialogue in face-to-face experiences. All had advanced academic degrees and extensive experiences facilitating dialogue between people of different religious beliefs. As the largest spiritual website, Beliefnet itself is non-denominational, and describes itself as a forum for discourse without pushing the agenda of any particular tradition. "We are a multi-faith e-community designed to help you meet your own religious and spiritual needs -- in an interesting, captivating and engaging way. We are independent. We are not affiliated with a particular religion or spiritual movement" ([Beliefnet, 2006a](#)). Since Beliefnet was the first site to create a space for online interfaith dialogue, their efforts serve as an example of effective and at times an ineffective means to facilitate discussion between people of different religious traditions.

## Advantages of Online Interfaith Dialogue

Significant positive benefits can arise in bringing people together for an online interfaith discussion. Steve Waldman, creator of Beliefnet says that "the anonymity of the Internet is what makes it work so well for religion . . . it's that you can explore religious matters in the privacy of your own home; ask questions you might be embarrassed to ask; have conversations with some anonymity; and do it anytime day or night" ([Last, 2005, p. 8](#)). Anonymity is assumed to allow users to play with identity, choosing their gender, sexual orientation, and religion; self-presenting as actors in the social experience ([Lindlof & Taylor, 2002](#)). In the interfaith rooms of Beliefnet, it is possible that the lack of physical symbols of religiousness, such as wearing a cross necklace, a kippah, or a headscarf, requires users to look to the words of the person before they can define them as an adherent of a particular tradition. This in itself has the potential to increase the speed with which participants can enter into different phases of interfaith dialogue. Further, online dialogue requires that participants have access to a computer instead of transportation to a face-to-face meeting, potentially allowing for the inclusion of people who might otherwise not partake in interfaith in interreligious exchange ([Oughton, 2006](#)).

Another advantage to interfaith dialogue over simply reading a world religions book or even a survey course in religion is the one-dimensional aspect of each tradition. Interacting with someone from another denomination enhances the spectrum of each religious tradition in that they speak about their observance and practices and allows for a range of adherence beyond doctrine. "Surveys tend to oversimplify traditions, and ignore the many voices and lived experiences of the cumulative aspects of the tradition" ([Berling, 2004, p. 83](#)). It is this spectrum of voices representing a tradition that allows for a richer sense of how a religion functions in the lives of individuals.

A benefit of the online dialogue format is that it allows instant connection to disparate people and a sense of anonymity stemming from not seeing the other person which allows

honesty, openness, and the development of a common ground for discussion ([Jones](#), 2006). [Preece and Maloney-Krichmar](#) (2003) describe common ground as an important component of group conversation and suggest that sharing the same physical arena, the ability to see and hear other participants, sharing the same temporality, being able to take turns, and the ability to review and revise messages. In text-based situations, messages must incorporate both information and emotional states and this leads to often deep relationships but ones that take much longer to develop than face to face associations ([Walther](#), 1996). This level of comfort seems to also rely upon users who have less familiarity with Internet conversation. Many of these issues of common ground are based upon face to face group situations while online situations remove the visual and aural cues and are often asynchronous, though this is not necessarily detrimental to the conversation experience. In some situations, text only environments can allow for greater self-disclosure when the information is potentially embarrassing ([Newell & Gregor](#), 1997).

## Limitations of Online Interfaith Dialogue

Online interfaith dialogue does have some drawbacks that must be addressed when planning the group discussion. There seems to be an interaction difference when it is not a "live" group of people and time lapse between conversation pieces exists ([Jones](#), 2006). In examining the interfaith forums from the Beliefnet archives, the dynamic experience of the dialogue as it occurred is absent ([Lindlof & Taylor](#), 2002). If posts feverishly appeared and were replied to about certain topics, drawing in and engaging participants in a way that other topics did not allow for, this would not be accounted for beyond recording time stamps. However, there are some benefits to the removal of immediate temporality as this allows for lengthier time for reflection and organization of thoughts into a composition ([Preece & Maloney-Krichmar](#), 2003). "The asynchronous or delayed capacities of these conferencing tools, for instance, allows learners some control, while increasing 'wait time' and general opportunities for reflective learning and processing of information" ([Hara, Bonk, & Angeli](#), 2000, p.116). For interfaith dialogue in the online medium, time is then both an advantage and a drawback. It allows for greater time to ponder information and to create new posts but also removes the dynamic nature typical of a reciprocal discussion environment.

Online addictions and virtual living are also problematic. [Turkle](#) (1995) says that as the examination of the relationship between online and face to face interaction suggests three ways in which online interactivity has the potential to skew in person experiences. First, she says that the artificial experiences may seem real. In interfaith dialogue this could indicate that a person who participates in reading interfaith dialogue exchanges and then moves to being able to discuss interreligious issues with less of a time lag might feel that the interaction of the second resource to be more real than it really is. Second, she says that the fake may seem more real than real. This could indicate that the experiences people have with interfaith dialogue in an online setting might seem more intimate or real to them than the interreligious discussions they could have face to face. Finally, [Turkle](#) suggests that people who have experiences online might feel that they have done more than they really have because of the intensity of the virtual nature.

At the end of the conversation some participants might feel that they have accomplished large things with respect to interreligious discourse and understanding but the feeling will soon subside and the results can be fleeting ([Jones](#), 2006). Further, during online discourse people are not interacting on a personal level, as they cannot see the facial expressions of the other participants and it is a distant means of communication ([Oughton](#), 2006). Through his experience with interfaith dialogue group, Oughton asserts that in the long run, face to face is more effective than online because friendships develop and potentially grow into participation in others' lives, which includes religious ceremonies and events.

The traditions become something more than a tradition discussed or read about and seen as something lived.

Another limitation of online interfaith dialogue is the potential for miscommunication. "Don't take offense. Others will be probing and asking questions and may inadvertently and unintentionally trample your 'sacred cow'" ([Landau, 2006b](#)). The issue of misreading posts or becoming offended based upon writing is a common flaw in online communication. People misread information, take statements personally when the intent was not there, as well as posters unable to adequately convey themselves in a format where nonverbal and emotional cues are absent. This lack of physical and nonverbal cues also is a limitation for online interfaith exchange, leading to difficulty in some interpretations and allow for the potential of misreading posts and responding negatively to words when this was not the intention of the author ([Lindlof & Taylor, 2002](#)). "Misunderstandings are particularly common among people who are not used to using the media because they have not had time to get used to it and to develop ways of getting around this problem" ([Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2003](#), p. 12).

An additional drawback is the difficulty in controlling the direction of the dialogue because of the dispersed power of the medium. "Dialogue is about listening to others and learning from them. It is counterproductive to allow any participant to target another participant for proselytism" ([Landau, 2006b](#)). This is, however, more challenging in an online setting when the forums are open and available to those who signed up to participate and their posts remain in the public sphere for all to read and respond to. In a face to face setting, a moderator might have the ability to direct attention away from an inappropriate speaker, to ask them to allow others to talk, to directly challenge their opinions, or to ask them to leave. In the online format, at least the way that the interfaith forums on Beliefnet are constructed, the participants have the power and must self-censor.

A final limitation to online interfaith discourse is the presence of lurkers. While there may be 13 participants listed as part of the room discussion only a fraction of that number regularly post to the forum, leaving lurkers who may read but never respond. Not only does their presence perhaps limit the readiness of participants to be open about their feelings of online interfaith dialogue but methodologically it is questionable whether the lurkers, by nature of their different activity than other participants, might have different experiences or perspectives and these ideas are lost in cyberspace. While removing the face to face presence of other members in the group might allow for greater disclosure it is also possible that knowing others are listening to the conversation but not contributing might also prevent full disclosure from participants. Lurkers present a problem in online social situations where members are talking about intensely personal information.

## Discussion

Considering all of this, many issues must be taken into consideration to increase participation and the effectiveness in online interfaith discourse. According to [Preece and Maloney-Krichmar \(2003\)](#), the role of the moderator in an online setting is to facilitate, manage, filter, serve as an expert, edit text, promote questions, and help people in general. Therefore, it is up to the moderator to provide strong direction for the dialogue and to prevent personal attacks and tangential talk. Several additional suggestions were offered by the Beliefnet interfaith dialogue moderators. [Jones \(2006\)](#) suggests that effective moderators need to remain active and involved in the forums, reading and posting regularly as well as providing participants with issues to consider in their offline time. He indicated that moderators should also take a firm stance on inappropriate behavior in the forums and have the ability to confront people about their conduct with others. Jones also suggested that moderators need to give their participants homework and ask that they learn

about a wide variety of traditions, perhaps ones they had never heard of, in order to be as inclusive of religious traditions as possible. Landau reiterates many of these sentiments and further indicates that good moderators needed to keep an even balance between opinion and fact, between the participants, and to incite thought and consideration over an issue that would resonate with participants into their offline lives ([Landau, 2006c](#)). [Oughton](#) (2006) believes that a good interreligious moderator has experience in this area and it is because of this professional background that he can give his opinion, background or viewpoints that participants might not be aware of to enhance the dialogue experience.

Unfortunately, interfaith discussion serves exclusively as an outreach for the community and interfaith dialogue remains low on the list of priorities for religious organizations. IFD typically does not recruit new believers and does not consolidate the community of believers the congregation currently has ([Landau, 2006c](#)). However, "mutual tolerance is essential for conflict prevention and resolution, and interfaith programs are designed to increase tolerance between participants through encounters with one another in an atmosphere of relative security and mutual respect. These programs foster empathy, and help participants form real relationships and develop a more complex and sophisticated understanding of each other" ([USIP, 2004, p. 5](#)). This is why incorporating interfaith dialogue into the resources congregations offer to their members is so crucial. Further, since more religious organizations are becoming part of cyberspace and with this more individuals rely upon the Internet to access information, it is also important that congregations utilize this medium to not only bring together adherents but also to provide them with a means to increase their tolerance of others of a different religion. Online discourse can join distant people with varied beliefs in a common space to for a common goal, to learn about each other.

"Dialogue should empower us to 'see through' the faith of others, and enable us to reexamine our assumptions of the other based on the other's definition of itself" ([Takim, 2004, p. 346](#)). Through this process, "others" become real people and it is the vicarious exposure to their experiences that people become more than representatives of their religious traditions. Online interreligious discourse not only unites people to learn about each others' lives but also to create common understandings. [Preece and Maloney-Krichmar](#) (2003) describe an online community as a group of members with shared interests or activities, repeated active action, have the ability to access a shared set of resources, may engage in the reciprocity of information, and work within a set of shared language and understandings. It is now up to the congregations to provide the space and resources to create interfaith communities and improve the tolerance of another's religion.

## Conclusions

In summary, the online format presents many benefits for the discussion of religion. Users are speaking in a relatively anonymous fashion, are exposed to a spectrum of practitioners of any given religious tradition, have the potential to feel very close to the other participants, and have the time to carefully compose and consider posts in the online forums. The main drawbacks of using the Internet for interreligious discourse is the lack of immediate response, users who live virtually and do not take what they have learned online into their physical lives, the effects of virtual dialogue might be fleeting, the potential for miscommunication, and finally the ability of the moderators to control the room and engage lurkers in the discussion. Moderators must be experienced, active, and able to control a room of very different people using only their word to keep conversation on track and lowering the risk of inappropriate comments and tangential discourse. So, how can congregations use this information to provide interfaith dialogue resources to their members?

First, congregations could consider live chat rooms that would engage in interreligious discourse. An appropriately experienced moderator would be selected and would control the room perhaps once a week. Participants could initially be invited to participate and eventually the ability to join the room would be open to anyone interested in interfaith dialogue. Second, if the live format is too expensive for webspace or too cumbersome for a moderator, the forum format like Beliefnet's interfaith dialogue rooms would be a strong substitute. The forum would be placed on a congregation's website and, again, a moderator would be chosen to keep the trajectory of posts on course. The advantage of both the chat room and the forum is that participants are interacting and discussing interfaith dialogue. [Bickart and Schindler](#) (2001) suggest that consumers who obtain information from online discussions tend to have greater interest in the product than those who obtained information from traditional web sources such as links to pages of text. While this study is based upon commercial marketing, the results nonetheless suggest that the interaction between people online does have the potential to increase interest in the topic that is being discussed and that interaction online centering on interreligious discourse can lead to more interest in interfaith issues among participants.

If interactive forums are simply beyond the fiscal or technical reach of congregations, other methods of incorporating interfaith efforts into webspace can be undertaken. Congregations who do run interfaith events in a face-to-face setting should use the Internet to highlight the sessions and encourage people to attend as well as encourage other congregations to become more active in interreligious discourse. Also, congregations should consider placing interfaith dialogue links on their website. Simply placing one or two resources that point to interreligious discussion is likely to enhance the embracing nature of a congregation as well as do their part to promote peace and tolerance through religion.

"Our conceptions of spirituality and of community are undergoing profound and permanent transformations in the era of computer-mediated communication" ([O'Leary](#), 1996, p. 782). This paper serves as a general overview of the potential to combine interfaith dialogue with a mass media and use the power of the Internet to bring together people from all over the world with very different religious beliefs for the common goals of tolerance and understanding. Beliefnet began the online interfaith forums as an experiment, but five years later the forums are still alive with talk of God, of difference, and of change. People were engaging with difficult and emotionally charged issues of faith, violence, and fear and were teaching and learning from each other about religion as a rich and lived experience. "Once opponents meet in a genuine dialogue setting, they will never return to the same positions or level of awareness that they had before. It is as if they have joined a new society. Their views and perceptions of the conflict and the enemy change, mostly because of the powerful turning point in the dialogue process when participants realize, acknowledge, and understanding their mutual fears and concerns" ([Abu-Nimer](#), 2002, p. 15). Through this project, it is the hope that more religious congregations become less fearful of using the Internet for interfaith dialogue and embrace the medium as something other than membership recruitment. More people are online than ever before and religious organizations should recognize the power they have to point users to interfaith resources and project a united front against religious intolerance.

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