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Multifaith Third Spaces: Digital Activism, *Netpeace*, and the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change

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Abstract: Multifaith spaces typically imply sites where people of diverse faith traditions gather to participate in shared activities or practices, such as multifaith prayer rooms, multifaith art exhibitions, or multifaith festivals. Yet, there is a lack of literature that discusses online multifaith spaces. This paper focuses on the website of an Australian multifaith organisation, the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change (ARRCC), which we argue is a third space of digital activism. We begin by outlining the main aims of the multifaith movement and how it responds to global risks. We then review religion and geography literature on space, politics and poetics, and on material religion and embodiment. Next, we discuss third spaces and digital activism, and then present a thematic and aesthetic analysis on the ARRCC website drawing on these theories. We conclude with a summary of our main findings, arguing that mastery of the online realm through digital third spaces and activism, combined with a willingness to partake in “real-world”, embodied activism, can assist multifaith networks and social networks more generally to develop *Netpeace* and counter the risks of climate change collaboratively.

Keywords: multifaith spaces; interreligious studies; sacred places; embodiment; materiality; third space; activism; digital activism; climate change

1. Introduction

This paper examines how multifaith networks are using online spaces to deal with what could be considered the greatest challenge of our contemporary time, climate change. Online spaces generate crucial components that can aid multifaith activism. This includes the capability to mobilise many dispersed individuals into action, to create shared symbols and stories in which religiously diverse individuals may find commonality, and to embody new modes of being that lead the viewer to take their digital activism into the “real world”. Material dimensions of online spaces also have the potential to mediate the viewers’ experience with both the broader community and with an experience of the sacred. Despite the potency of online spaces, research into multifaith online spaces is a lacuna in the field of interreligious studies. This paper seeks to remedy this gap in the literature by drawing together the themes of climate change, online spaces, and the multifaith movement to demonstrate how the interactions between these spheres are shaping the material world.

The study of multifaith spaces arises from a broader field of interreligious studies that emerged at the turn of the twenty-first century in response to the growing presence of religion in the public sphere. A sub-field within it centres on research of multifaith/interfaith engagement and social movements.

Anna Halafoff (2013) in her study of the global multifaith movement outlined its four main aims as follows:

- “[D]eveloping understanding of diverse faiths and of the nature of reality;
- C hallenging exclusivity and normalising pluralism;
- A ddressing global risks and injustices; and
- C reating multi-actor peacebuilding networks for common security” (Halafoff 2013, p. 163).

She also argued that *Netpeace* was a preferable option to netwar for countering global risks such as terrorism and climate change, in response to terrorism studies scholars’ John Arquilla’s and David Ronfeldt’s (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 2001, p. 15) observation that “it takes networks to fight networks” in their book on *Networks and Netwars*. Halafoff’s (2013, p. 169) theory of *Netpeace*, modelled by the global multifaith movement, “acknowledges the interconnectedness of global problems and solutions, and particularly the capacity of critical and collaborative networks, including state, non-state and religious actors co-committed towards common good, to solve the world’s most pressing problems” together.

The global multifaith movement, which includes a multitude of international and more local multifaith networks and organisations, has thereby always had an activist, peacebuilding agenda and has played a role, among many other strategies, in preventing and countering violent extremism and negative stereotypes of religious minorities. It has also, at times, such as in the late 1980s–early 1990s following the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the mid-2000s after the release of Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*, and currently alongside the School Climate Strikes movement, campaigned for solutions to climate change and the resulting environmental crises (Halafoff 2013). However, according to Fahy and Bock’s (2018) survey of the multifaith movement in Delhi, Doha, and London, many proponents of the multifaith movement still place too much emphasis on formalised dialogue rather than on collaborative social action. Whilst recognising that dialogue is important, Fahy and Bock (2018) recommend that the multifaith movement learns to broaden its repertoire beyond dialogue in order to engage with global risks such as climate change more effectively.

In recent years, religious activity has been extended into digital spaces, as religious organisations increasingly use the internet to spread their messages and to increase their presence and influence online (Campbell 2012; Hoover and Echchaibi 2012; Tomalin et al. 2015). Katherine Marshall (2017, p. 34) notes that although new media “opens new vistas” and can be used to rally global support and mobilise multifaith networks in response to crises, due to a generational divide, religious leaders have been slow to exploit the potentials of social media. An additional challenge faced by multifaith organisations is that they must compete, in what Zeynep Tufekci (2017, pp. 30–31) calls the “attention economy”, with voices who seek to spread misunderstanding and hatred. An exception to the trends, and the focus of this paper, is the website of an Australian multifaith environmental network, the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change (ARRCC). ARRCC is an example of a multifaith network that is engaged in digital activism and that is highly effective at using the online realm to connect faith-based activists across Australia and mobilise them to take collaborative action on climate change.

ARRCC formed in 2008 with the sponsorship of the Climate Institute. According to its website (ARRCC n.d.a), ARRCC was launched at a ceremony at the Centre for Islamic Sciences and Human Development in Lakemba, Sydney. They have 140 formal members, as well as the membership of 35 religious organisations (ARRCC n.d.a). ARRCC uses the online realm to generate the momentum needed to perform its climate activism by mobilising a large and religiously diverse network of volunteers. Among many actions, they have been involved in campaigning against construction of the Adani Carmichael coal mine in Queensland, Australia. They also organise and facilitate Living the Change workshops, encourage religious communities to switch to renewable energy and sustainable practices, and are proponents of the fossil fuel divestment movement. The ARRCC website is a directory for past and future protest actions; a resource that provides handbooks and guides on religious ecology, sustainability, and non-violent direct action; and a means to connect to ARRCC’s network.

Online spaces are interpellated with broader politics and poetics related to sacred space. Specifically, the ARRCC website speaks to a wider context of climate change politics, whereby the sacrality, and therefore value, of the natural environment is a space of religious and secular contestation. We will demonstrate how the material mediation of the online sphere affectively influences the lived bodies of its viewers by generating coherent shared narratives and embodied modes of activism.

As ARRCC is a multifaith organisation mainly concerned with climate change, a key part of its effectiveness is its ability to create a coherent multifaith narrative that people from many religions may relate to and has the power to inspire activism and change. The ARRCC website does this by imbuing its viewers with multifaith values and a shared narrative of ecological concern by instructing, influencing, and enthusing them to embody the modality of the climate activist. We will move to conclude that mastery of the online realm through “third spaces” and digital activism (Hoover and Echchaibi 2012; Tomalin et al. 2015), as well as the willingness to partake in “real-world”, embodied activism, are tools that have great potential to assist multifaith networks in their ability to counter climate change and to work toward *Netpeace* collaboratively.

2. Methodology

This research is connected to a larger Australian Research Council (ARC) funded project, which examines the current trends and dynamics of religious diversity in Australia.¹ Geraldine Smith, one of the co-authors of this article, is a PhD student working on this ARC project, co-supervised by the other co-author Anna Halafoff. Smith’s thesis examines multifaith negotiations, both in the real world and online, in Australia. ARRCC was chosen as a case study for this article and Smith’s doctoral research, as it is one of the largest and most active multifaith organisations in the Australian context.² It is also significant, because it is focused upon climate change, which is increasingly generating global concern. The purpose of this research is to examine how the ARRCC website fulfils multifaith goals to counter global risks and lobby for action on climate change, how it communicates its ideas, and what aesthetic elements are used to create a shared narrative for a multifaith audience.³

The paper begins by outlining the main aims of the multifaith movement and how it responds to global risks, drawing on Halafoff (2013) previous research in this field. We next review religion and geography literature on space, politics and poetics, and on material religion and embodiment. We also examine theories of third spaces and digital activism. We then present a thematic and aesthetic analysis of the ARRCC website, undertaken by Smith, drawing on these theories. We conclude with a summary of our main findings.

The thematic and aesthetic analysis of the ARRCC website involved examining what information is presented, what images and symbols are used, how certain topics are discussed, and what digital tools are offered by the website. The website was approached as a space that was engaged in and explored by an embodied viewer. A similar approach is taken by Stromer-Galley and Martey (2009) in their analysis of the environment of the online game *Second Life*. In this study, they apply architectural and embodiment theories to understand how the visual-spatial context of *Second Life* shapes the behaviours and norms of users. They argue that, “behaviour is structured via norms established through visual contexts that are constrained and enabled by the code that is used to create a given

¹ Religious diversity in Australia: Strategies to maintain social cohesion, Australian Research Council Discovery Project 2018–2020, led by Chief Investigator Douglas Ezzy (University of Tasmania), with Chief Investigators Gary D. Bouma (Monash University), Greg Barton (Deakin University), Anna Halafoff (Deakin University), Lori Beaman (University of Ottawa), and Robert Jackson (University of Warwick).

² Human Research Ethics (H0018289) approval was granted for Smith’s PhD research on 6 August 2019. Approval was also sought from ARRCC to include ARRCC as a case study in this thesis.

³ ARRCC is also highly active on social media sites and it is a frequent participant in acts of non-violent direct action. This aspect of ARRCC’s work, as well as data on how ARRCC members use and interpret the website, is explored in detail in Smith’s doctoral research but is beyond the scope of this article.

online world" (Stromer-Galley and Martey 2009, p. 1043). Similarly, this thematic and aesthetic analysis of the ARRCC website seeks to understand how the visual-spatial context created by the gestalt of images, colours, language, and format produces embodied norms and behaviours in both online and offline spaces of multifaith activism.

3. The Politics and Poetics of Sacred Space

Scholars in the sub-field of geography and religion have explored the relationship of religion and space in significant detail, through studies of changes in the spatial distribution of religion, sacred places and structures, pilgrimage sites, homes, and gardens and in the media. According to Lily Kong (1990, p. 358), contemporary studies of religion and geography highlight "reciprocity in the network of relations" between religion, environment, and society. They do so by focusing on the social construction of sacred spaces, and also the contestation over them, including institutional, everyday, and virtual spaces (Kong 1990, 2001, 2010).

In the early 2000s, Kong (2001) called for the need to examine interconnections between private and public spheres, the religious and secular, and the poetic and the political, when examining religion and space. She was drawing here on what Chidester and Linenthal (1995, p. 6) referred to as "the politics and the poetics of sacred space". They explained how "substantial" definitions describe the "essential character" of the sacred as "an uncanny, awesome, or powerful manifestation of reality, full of ultimate significance". Such definitions focus on the "experiential, imaginative, and poetic dynamics of sacred space". By contrast, they argued that "situational" definitions locate the sacred in the social as "nothing is inherently sacred", given that the sacred is "an empty signifier" and therefore a "by-product" of "the ongoing cultural work of sacralizing space, time, persons, and social relations", in which ritual as an "embodied spatial practice" plays a central role (Chidester and Linenthal 1995, pp. 5–6, 9–10, 32). As Belden C. Lane (2002, p. 25) stated, "ordinary" spaces can be "ritually set apart to become extraordinary".

Chidester and Linenthal (1995, p. 15) also pointed out how sacred spaces are "not merely discovered, or founded, or constructed", they are "claimed, owned, and operated by people advancing specific interests." They are also spaces where "power relations . . . between insiders and outsiders, rulers and subjects, elders and juniors, males and females, and so on" can be both "reinforced" and "resisted" (Chidester and Linenthal 1995, p. 16). Consequently, these spaces can be both "integrative" and "disruptive" (Lane 2002, p. 48). Lane (2002, p. 4), also argued, alongside scholars within what can be termed a non-human or more-than-human turn in the social sciences, that a sacred space "is necessarily more than a construction of the human imagination". He noted that "[t]he motion of wind through the limbs of a juniper tree in a red rock canyon . . . these, too, are a part of the dynamic reciprocity that makes up the ambient character of any desert monastery or roadside shrine" (Lane 2002, p. 4).

This understanding also extends to online spaces, which frames the experiences of online and offline space through online architecture and atmospheres. Edward Casey (2001) considered the relationship between place and humanity as co-constitutive. He stated that the lived body, "encounters the place-world by going out to meet it" (Casey 2001, p. 688). He also argued that place and self are "constitutive coingredience", which are inextricably part of the construction of the other. He added that "neither body nor place is a wholly determinate entity; each continually evolves, precisely in relation to the other" (Casey 2001, p. 688). The lived body also retains traces of places where it has been, and the self becomes sedimented with the subtle affectivity of places. In addition, "the place-world is energized and transformed by the bodies that belong to it" (Casey 2001, p. 688).

In so-called post-modern, post-secular societies, scholars have also noted that people are increasingly seeking to reconnect with nature to counter the pressures of capitalism and industrialisation (Halafoff 2017). Mazumdar and Mazumdar (2009) work in particular has been centred on everyday sacred places, aesthetics, and their calming effects, including gardens. Wil Gesler's (2005) and Alison Williams (2007) research on "therapeutic landscapes" also investigates places equated with

healing, and there is an emerging literature on yoga communities and retreat centres and their growing popularity in contemporary societies (Conradson 2007; Hoyez 2007; Jain 2014; Halafoff 2017). The desire to reconnect with place emerges from what Casey (2001, p. 684) described as the “disarray of place”. Drawing on Robert David Sack’s assertion that post-modernity has “thinned out” place, he argued that glocalisation has led to the attenuation of place by the fact that “a given locale is linked to every other place in global space, pre-eminently by the internet” (Casey 2001, p. 684). Yet, Casey (2001) conceded that this can lead to the enrichment of self, as we are compelled to seek out thicker places and traverse across greater distances of actual and virtual spaces. Therefore, engaging in the online realm causes us to enter new realms that, before the advent of digital technology, were inaccessible and incomprehensible.

4. Online Materiality, Virtuality, and Embodiment

The “material turn” of the 1980s sought to challenge, as Jessica Moberg (2016) states, the “localisation of religion and culture in the immaterial realm and the understanding of attachment to objects as inherently pathological” (Moberg 2016, p. 2). The study of material culture and religion aims to address the overemphasis on belief systems and textual traditions. It also has the objective to adopt an integrated approach that also examines the material manifestations of religion, such as embodied practices, rituals, and art forms (Houtman and Meyer 2012).

Scholarship on the multifaith movement is also undergoing a material turn. While, as described above, interreligious dialogue is often the dominant mode in which multifaith interactions take place and are examined (Swidler 1983, 2016; Cornille 2008), there are many scholars now examining material aspects of multifaith engagement through ritual, social activism, and state management (Griera 2019; Halafoff 2013; Moyaert 2019). Marianne Moyaert’s (2019) recent edited volume on interterritoriality, which is the study of how multifaith interactions occur on non-discursive levels of ritual, practice, and embodiment, is a pivotal book that challenges the overemphasis on dialogue and invites a new field of multifaith materiality.

The online world presents a challenge to conceptions of materiality, because it is, in part, immaterial. In Daniel Miller’s (Miller 2009) discussion on how the internet fits into a larger understanding of material culture, he stated that “the Internet is not a thing and has no clear material form except through the box and screen that is the computer” (Miller 2009, pp. 110–1). The internet is defined not by what it is materially, but by its capacities, potentials, and genres of use. He argued that the internet should not only be described as a technology but as “a platform which enables peoples to create technologies” (Miller 2009, p. 113). It possesses a uniquely generative potential to continually create new modalities of use. Webb Keane (2003) described this process as “bundling”, whereby objects that are made up of many qualities that lead to the object’s value, utility, and relevance vary across different contexts. The potential for bundling in the online sphere can therefore be used to create realms in which users develop new forms of online use, e.g., as a tool for creating realms of activism.

According to Birgit Meyer (2012), the study of material religion examines the process of materialising “a sense of the presence of something beyond” (Meyer 2012, p. 22) through art, practises, music, objects, pictures, or performance. Drawing on Bruno Latour, Meyer (2012) describes this process as “fabrication”, whereby that which is beyond is brought into a mutually constitutive relationship and ends up shaping (and being shaped by) the material world. This can produce extraordinary, divine, sublime, or transcendent experiences (Meyer 2012). The construction of online spaces may also be considered a tool to materialise a sense of something beyond, and as will be shown below, this is evident on the ARRCC website. The online realm not only affects the experiences of the online viewer, but also what occurs in the offline realm—it is a co-constitutive part of reality. Niels Van Doorn’s understanding of virtuality, which was developed by Marcel Proust, Henry Bergson, and Gilles Deleuze, considers the online realm to be a virtual medium that is constitutive of everyday reality. Virtuality is an ontological category that can refer to many mediums, such as film, art, photography or television, and experiences such as memories and images. Van Doorn defines the virtual “as an

immanent and immaterial form of agency or potential: effectively but not formally or materially existing with the interstices of everyday life” (Van Doorn 2011, p. 533). The virtual medium is something that is a generative part of everyday reality—a form of immateriality that actualises our potential reality (Van Doorn 2011).

The process of materialising a sense of something beyond into the world produces, and is produced by, ways of being. Meyer (2012) argues that religion is “the practice of mediation through which a distance between the immanent and what lies ‘beyond’ ... is posited and held to be bridged, albeit temporarily” (Meyer 2012, p. 24). This bridging occurs by materialising that which is beyond by shaping and evoking particular “sensational forms”, which refers to “a configuration of religious media, acts, imaginations and bodily sensations” (Meyer 2012, p. 26). In the online realm, users engage in unique sensational forms through digital texts, images, material, aesthetics, and online architecture, and these produce an embodied way of being (Van Doorn 2011). These digital objects co-constitute how the viewer operates in a given space; therefore, they can be manipulated to produce specific experiences. Miller (2009) argues that objects act as framing devices that inform us of the genre of the activity. Due to objects often going unnoticed—what he calls “the humility of things”—they have greater power to shape our expectations and ensure appropriate behaviour without being challenged. He states that “they determine what takes place to the extent that we are unconscious of their capacity to do so” (Miller 2009, p. 50).

Material mediation can invoke a particular embodiment—a way of being or bodily technique—fashioned by a culture or religious tradition that produces an extraordinary experience (Meyer 2012). Not only do practices of mediation evoke experience, they can also shape how an individual behaves—their ethos, habits, and perceptions. Embodiment theory emerged as a rejection to Cartesian dualism, which dichotomised the mind and the body into separate realms, by early phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. They established that the human body is always enmeshed in the physical world and that it comes to *be* in a particular way according to the factors of its environment. Furthermore, our experiences, thoughts, ideals, intentions, and actions are entwined and occur at once in the lived body (Seamon 2018).

Later developments in embodiment theory suggested that whilst we are products of the structures in which we reside, we are also agents in the construction of identity, power, and politics. Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) theoretical concept of habitus suggests that whilst we are limited by these social structures, we also participate in the structuring of these structures. Similarly, Irving Goffman (1990) qualified that we actively partake in the dramatisation of our identity by “performing” ourselves like actors on a stage. Judith Butler (2014) developed this further through her analysis of the social construction of gendered bodies. Our gendered identities begin to be constituted at birth by a socially constructed “stylization of acts” (Butler 2014, p. 190) that are incorporated into our performance of self. Unlike Goffman, Butler considers the performance of identity to be not a representation of deeper self or a deceitful facsimile, but the manifestation of the self and one’s socio-political environment. Performance possesses political implications; therefore, it can be used as a form of activism. Moreover, online mediation has the potential to generate radically new spheres of activism, where iterations of performance, experience, and identity may take place. For example, Lövheim and Lundmark’s (2019) study of women who use the digital realm to express their experiences and opinions regarding religion demonstrates that online spaces allow for women to develop new forms of authority. This is further explored below in the discussion on third spaces and digital activism (Hoover and Echchaibi 2012; Tomalin et al. 2015).

So far, this paper has demonstrated how online space co-constitutes ways of being and is interconnected with the creation of sacrality through embodied ritual and practice. We have also touched on how space is directly entangled in the social construction of politics and poetics of the offline/online world. As Chidester (2018b, p. 5) explains,

With respect to space, structural oppositions—inside and outside, up and down—are deployed in producing spatial orientations of religious purity and power: religious purity

through rituals of exclusion; and religious power through rituals of subordination, subjection, and extraction of human and material resources. While an embodied poetics is involved in these structural oppositions ... an oppositional politics is also integral to productions of sacred space. With respect to time, poetics and politics also merge, with embodied sensory rituals marking out temporal processes and authoritative mythic narratives marking out temporal origins.

It is in the complexities (Furseth 2018), and incongruities (Jonathan 1982), and surprises (Capps 1979) where these “disparate factors converge without synthesis” that offer “the most promising openings in religious studies” (Chidester 2018b, p. 5). Chidester (2018b, p. 10) calls for more research on religious mobility and the ways in which “[m]aterialities mediate these circulations ... from embodied intimacy to global economy.” We will now discuss how online spaces combine the embodied with the global through their use as third spaces that seek to challenge and transgress traditional power structures.

5. Third Spaces and Digital Activism

The digital activism that occurs on the ARRCC website is directly connected to its activism within the “real world”. ARRCC’s activism is supported by the continuous domains of the online and offline world. In early literature on online media, the online world was considered separate to “real-world” spaces. Van Doorn (2011) notes that ideas of virtual reality and cyberspace “remains haunted by a retro-futuristic imagery of sluggish bodies that are stuck in front of a computer screen (or attached to a head-set), while disembodied minds are able to roam around in a virtual realm of abstract and decontextualized information” (Van Doorn 2011, p. 532). The disembodied, illusory, and decontextualised vision of the online realm was partly evoked by science-fiction novel *Neuromancer* and by the film *The Matrix*, which implanted itself into the imagination of theorists (Consalvo and Ess 2011). Scholars now recognise that the offline and online realms can inform and shape one another and that internet use has become assimilated into everyday life (Campbell 2013; Bakardjieva 2011; Consalvo and Ess 2011; Lazarus 2019).

This view of the online realm, however, had a political consequence. It led to the underestimation of online social activism as “slacktivism”, whereby online acts were considered powerless and ineffectual toward instigating change (Tufekci 2017). However, Tufekci’s (2017) study of social movements such as the Gezi Park Protests, the Arab Spring, and the Occupy movement demonstrate the potency of the online realm to create large networks that draw together and coordinate protest actions on a scale not possible before. By extension, this also led to the underestimation of how political and corporate bodies could use the online realm to their own advantages. In the same way that sacred spaces are places bound up in contestations over power and meaning, online spaces are political battlegrounds where interested parties jostle for a monopoly on the “attention economy” (Tufekci 2017).

ARRCC’s use of digital activism is a manifestation of how the politics of the online realm have thus altered how people engage in the public sphere. Adam Greenfield (2017, p. 6) argues that, “networked digital information technology has become the dominant mode through which we experience the everyday”. He argues that the advancement in internet technology with the use of algorithms, which collects personal data in order to feedback individuated information, has created a world where each individual experiences the world through a personalised and augmented echo chamber of reality. According to Greenfield (2017), this has eroded the public sphere. Vincent Mosco (2017) points out that internet technology allows greater access to more information yet has also made it easier to spread misinformation. Online space is colonised by the profiteering interests of a handful of large corporations: Apple, Google, Microsoft, Amazon, and Facebook. It is also colonised by political interests that manipulate algorithms to control the information flow to manage user behaviour. Mosco (2017) notes the concerning ways in which political advertising firms have the capability to control the flow of real and fake news to prevent people from being able to make informed decisions

when voting. The online realm is a highly contested space, because those who control the flow of information have the power to construct the lived realities of its users.

Whilst the online world may be an occupied realm where competing interests seek control of the flow of information, the immaterial nature of the internet means that new spaces of civil engagement can be created. One way in which the generative possibilities of the online realm reveal themselves is in the creation of “third spaces” in which traditional structures can be challenged and new forms of engaging with religion can be developed. The “third space”, is a term coined by Homi K. Bhabha (1990, 1994) and a theory developed by Edward Soja (1996), which was first applied to online spaces by Hoover and Echchaibi (2012). The third space is a fluid realm that exists as alternative to or outside of traditional domains of power, which can be utilised as a place where existing power structures, logic, discourses, and embodiments may be challenged or re-negotiated and new ones developed in their place (Hoover and Echchaibi 2012; Tomalin et al. 2015). The ARRCC website acts as a third space, because it generates a multifaith narrative that highlights a shared sacrality of the natural environment and the obligation for humanity to care for it, as well as ways to embody the performance of this narrative in the “real world”. The ARRCC website is also a third space, because it challenges narratives of climate change denialism and religious exclusivism.

The potential to challenge religious traditions through third spaces is examined in Tomalin et al.’s (2015) research into how Buddhist women use online spaces to challenge the traditional structures of gender inequality in Buddhist traditions. Whilst the Buddhist women’s social movement has been manifested through websites and social media, it is also used to complement offline activity. Tomalin et al. (2015) explain that online connectivity allows global networking, fundraising, and sharing content, which then fuels “real-world” initiatives. They also highlight “shifting authority” as a key part of Buddhist women’s online activism—this too is an important aspect of multifaith environmental activism.

In the context of women’s social movements in Buddhism, the online third space may provide a means to challenge traditional authorities that promulgate gender inequality. However, by the same token, the online realm can also be used as a means to re-assert traditional authority (Tomalin et al. 2015). So too can the online space be used to spread prejudice toward religious groups and misinformation regarding climate science. Tomalin et al. (2015) argue that the internet has enabled “cyber sisters” to raise awareness of gender inequality within Buddhism and to disrupt and challenge it by posting and blogging images and excerpts of texts and narratives related to powerful historical and contemporary female Buddhist practitioners and teachers, thereby usurping dominant patriarchal narratives. The importance of aesthetics and therefore materiality in these digital third spaces and their potency in embodied activism and resulting social change are what we wish to further interrogate in this paper in our case study of ARRCC’s digital activism. As Chidester (2018a, pp. 206, 210) concludes, “dynamic” “materiality is a matter of force and effect, a configuration of discourse and power that makes a difference in the world”.

6. Analysis of ARRCC’s Website

6.1. *The Politics of the Sacred*

The ARRCC website, on the one hand, is a third space that challenges religious exclusivism and prejudice. On the other hand, it acts as a third space for climate activism. ARRCC is entangled in the broader contestations regarding the sacrality of the natural environment, climate change denialism, and religious pluralism. ARRCC’s work intersects into the fields of religious diversity by asserting itself as an organisation that is acting upon a shared religious mandate to care for the environment. ARRCC is in alignment with the multifaith movement’s goal to dismantle religious exclusivism and promote a pluralistic approach to other religions (Halafoff 2013). Its work as a multifaith organisation puts it in opposition with voices who seek to spread misunderstanding and prejudice. Furthermore, whilst many authorities in religious traditions accept multifaith as part of their mandate, some religious

authorities for regions, schools, or sects reject it. In addition, whilst many consider caring for the environment part of their religious obligations, many do not.

ARRCC's position on multifaith climate action is articulated in a document called the "Theological Position Paper", which is available on the ARRCC website. It was produced by Bishop George Browning (2011) with the consultation of members of the multi-faith ARRCC Religious Leaders Working Group. This document articulates a common narrative on how ARRCC engages with the intersecting poetic and political dimensions of the environment (Browning 2011). The document argues that all religions have a spiritual mandate to care for humanity and that this is bound up in caring for the environment. It states that "[c]ommon to all faiths is teaching that life is relational, that human beings, while having the responsibility to care for creation, are also part of it. Humanity's health is directly related to the health of the whole created order" (Browning 2011, p. 1).

It goes on to state that anthropogenic climate change is real and acting on the climate crisis is a moral issue. It affirms that ecological justice is intrinsically intertwined with social justice, as environmental destruction and climate change will lead to significantly large humanitarian issues, which will mostly affect future generations. The world's most prosperous have the most significant carbon footprint, and it is the world's poorest and most vulnerable who will be most impacted. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the world's developed nations to act on climate change. It also cites the issue as a moral one, because a lack of care toward the ecological destruction occurring is an indictment on the integrity of humanity (Browning 2011).

The ARRCC website is also an expression of the goals of the multifaith movement to use multi-actor peacebuilding networks to find global solutions to global challenges such as climate change (Halafoff 2013). ARRCC speaks to a larger debate regarding how the environment ought to be treated and challenges those who consider the environment to be an endless resource to be exploited for economic gain. ARRCC challenges traditional structures that reinforce religious conservatism that supports climate change denial, as well as the authority of the Australian government, which, as was revealed by the Sustainable Development Report of 2019, is significantly falling behind other developed nations in taking sufficient action to counter climate change (Sachs et al. 2019).

Debate over climate change is caught up in the spheres of the political and the religious. Religious bodies, especially multifaith organisations, such as ARRCC, have long been advocating for environmental rights (Halafoff 2013; Jenkins et al. 2018). However, there are also many who occupy a position of climate change denialism. In their review of religious engagement with the climate change issue, Jenkins et al. (2018, p. 90) note that the "most important fault lines in religious engagements with climate change are not between religious traditions but within them". Research on select religious groups also suggests that climate change denialism has a close relationship with religious beliefs (Jenkins et al. 2018). Wylie Carr et al. (2012) note that Evangelical Christians are the most sceptical groups in America with respect to climate change. They state that their "common interpretations of core evangelical beliefs led primarily to climate scepticism" (Carr et al. 2012, p. 278). Jenkins et al. (2018) state, however, that other scholarship has concluded that religious beliefs are only one determinant factor in how an individual perceives climate change. They suggest that that which determines an individual's opinion on climate change is more dependent upon a network of relations regarding education, political beliefs, and geographic location.

The religious-political power struggle between activists and politicians is performed through the cultural work of maintaining, reinforcing, circulating, and contesting the sacrality of the natural environment. Media and the online sphere act as a platform where these battles over meaning take place—including ARRCC's website. Interested parties weaponise the symbolic potential of objects, and ritual forms into powerful signifiers of their message, which are then communicated through online media. In 2017, Scott Morrison, who in 2018 became the first Prime Minister to identify as a Pentecostal Christian, brought a lump of coal into Parliament to tell the parliament to not be afraid of a coal-fuelled energy industry. The image of Scott Morrison holding a lump of coal in Parliament later became mythologised as a symbol of the government's allegiance to the coal mining industry.

The performativity of a lump of coal in Parliament imbued the coal with the symbolic weight of Morrison's commitment to the prosperity of the Australian people. In 2019, ARRCC responded by making a mockery of the government's reverence for the coal industry by performing several mock "Funeral for Coal" protests outside the offices of various MPs. These protests entailed a black casket being carried down the street in a long funeral procession led by a religious leader, who then also led a mock funeral service. These events were advertised on ARRCC's website to encourage their membership to join the protests and were reported in articles on the website after they had occurred ([ARRCC n.d.d](#)).

6.2. ARRCC's Digital Third Space

ARRCC uses the online sphere to connect a multifaith network through a common concern for climate change and the shared practices of climate activism. To do this, they draw on the material manifestations of aesthetics and the architecture of the online realm to connect viewers to a shared experience of the sacred. As noted previously, third spaces are realms where the dominant narratives of traditional authority can be challenged and new narratives and ways of being can be remastered in their place. ARRCC's website is a third space, because it imbues its viewers with a coherent multifaith narrative of shared ecological concern. It is also the site where this narrative is constantly being shaped by the engagement of ARRCC members through their contributions of articles, essays, news stories, and online and embodied activism.

ARRCC also offers the viewer the opportunity to develop a narrative of religious ecological concern based in their own religion. In one tab called "Reflect" ([ARRCC n.d.c](#)), the website exhibits its "tools for reflection" in which the viewer can explore how different faiths relate to the environment. The list of faiths that are explored include Baha'ism, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism. Each faith is represented with a symbol that is hyperlinked to other parts of the website, which contain information specific to that religion. For each page dedicated to each religion, the information it supplies includes prayers, scriptures and holy writings, sermons, outlines, statements by faith leaders, writings and reflections, and videos, all of which relate to issues of climate change and ecological justice. This provides information for those who do not belong to those particular religions, thus fulfilling the multifaith goal to develop understanding of other religions. It also offers a means for those within those religious traditions to develop a narrative of religious ecology, articulated by theologians and scholars within their religious tradition.

These disparate narratives that articulate a concern for climate change from the perspective of each religion are then drawn together in other parts of the website that highlight the commonality between these stories. In the Theological Position Paper, they affirm that caring for the environment is intrinsic to fulfilling the religious and spiritual purposes of many religions: "Our faith communities hold in common an understanding that human beings are vocationally called to be carers of creation. In some faiths we see this vocation as being in partnership with the Creator" ([Browning 2011](#), p. 4).

In other parts of the website, ARRCC highlights the multifaith aspect of its activism by arguing that the collaborative efforts of religious communities have a significant role to play in achieving this goal: "ARRCC believes the world's religions, including indigenous spiritualities, all have unique perspectives to contribute to a safer climate future. United, we can accomplish great things as we work together for a better future" ([ARRCC n.d.c](#)).

ARRCC's narrative also positions religions as contravening voices that reject the rampant individualist and selfish goals of neoliberal capitalism and instead uphold values of altruism, compassion, and peace. ARRCC is critical of the mythos of endless economic growth and the continual exploitation of limited natural resources. ARRCC identifies this as a malady of individualism: "We note with sadness the primacy that is given to the individual at the expense of communities, both human and non-human" ([Browning 2011](#), p. 4). Rather, ARRCC argues that shared human and ecological well-being should be the priority.

By drawing from scriptures, theology, and religious leaders' statements, ARRCC brings validity to its core narrative—that most religions can find commonality in a shared concern for the environment and a duty to protect it. One of Catherine Cornille's (2013) conditions of interreligious dialogue is that religious groups must recognise that there is some form of common goal or experience that connects different religions together. Developing a coherent narrative that articulates that common goal is challenging but necessary to promote collaborative action. The process of translating a multifaith organisation into the online context can be a challenging process and can become a site of contestations over representation and aesthetics. One issue identified by Noomen et al. (2012) in their study of how Dutch Catholic, Protestant, and the cultic milieu have adapted to using the online realm, is the pressure of representing the multitude of Protestant viewpoints in a single webpage—this pressure must be even greater in a multifaith scenario. A significant challenge for web designers working on creating an all-encompassing webpage on the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN) was attempting to represent the vast, contentious, and fragmented realm of Dutch Protestantism. The web designers lamented the challenges of creating a visually engaging webpage that would provide information on the diversity of Protestantism without upsetting a particular group, whilst working with a very limited pool of appropriate images to accompany the page (Noomen et al. 2012).

The ARRCC website overcomes this issue by using a vocabulary of aesthetics drawn from images of the environment and natural landscapes. ARRCC's aesthetics, imagery, and language all point toward a shared ecological concern and reverence for the natural environment. The page is a professionally created website that is vibrant with multiple colours that evoke a reference to the colours of the ocean, grass, and the sun. The background of the webpage is a peaceful scene of Australian bush, with the sun glowing from behind a silhouette of Eucalyptus trees and obscuring what lies beyond. This background underlays every page of the website. Overt religious symbolism is minimal and deliberate; instead, the natural world is both sacralised, through the use of images and narratives, and given space to evoke its own poetic sacredness, drawing the viewer in to experience beauty, peace, wonder, and awe. The opening page exhibits a rotating panel with quotes from multifaith and religious leaders. Next to these quotes is a religious symbol denoting which religion the individual quote comes from, which is superimposed on an image of a natural landscape, such as a desert, the ocean, a glacier, or a mountain range. Notably, the quotes are not from the usual religious peacebuilders, such as Gandhi or Martin Luther King, but from local religious and multifaith leaders from Australian organisations (ARRCC n.d.b).

These digital objects of images, language, and stories subtly shape how the viewers understand the natural environment and their position in relation to it. By providing viewers with information on the religious ecology of different religions, ARRCC encourages its viewers to educate themselves further on other religions, as well as their own, and to develop their own narratives regarding the sacrality of the natural world. ARRCC does so to disrupt traditional religious and state neoliberal authorities' dominionist and exploitative narratives. Instead the ARRCC website creates a new third space and a narrative to inspire love for and connection with nature and embodied activism to revere and preserve it.

6.3. *Embodying the Climate Activist*

ARRCC's website invites the viewer to adopt the performed identity of a climate activist. ARRCC offers a means for individuals to take climate action into their own hands, by offering instruction on how they can make changes themselves, encourage changes within their faith community, or lobby the government to make changes to protect the environment. The ARRCC website consistently invites the viewers to make their online engagement and activism continuous with their offline actions. ARRCC encourages practices of non-violent direct action, multifaith collaboration, and lobbying campaigns, as well as individual and grassroots changes to achieve this goal. This imbues its viewers with an embodied sense of environmental conscientiousness and offers them ways in which to perform an activist identity. Participation in taking climate action and one's religious and spiritual obligations

are intertwined on the ARRCC website. By engaging in online and offline climate activism, the viewers are engaging with the sacred. The ARRCC website is mediating their connection to the “beyond” realm. In one sense, ARRCC connects them with a broader conception of the geographically dispersed ARRCC community, as well as its values and purpose. In another sense, ARRCC mediates their connection to their experience of the sacred.

The first image that the audience sees upon entering the webpage is an invitation to engage in offline interaction through a listing of upcoming ARRCC events. Reminders of how the audience’s online interaction with the site can be turned to real-world, embodied actions are common in most areas on the website. The side panel of each page consists of hyperlinks to make a donation, become a member, and “download a climate action kit for your faith”, as well as a list of upcoming events. Another example of this is the section on “Living the Change”, which is a program that encourages significant lifestyle changes to reduce one’s carbon emissions. Living the Change in-person workshops are advertised on the website, and an information resource on the program is also available on the website. The viewer can also “make a commitment” to a carbon-reducing lifestyle change, such as becoming vegetarian, installing solar panels, eating fewer dairy products, and/or taking public transport ([ARRCC n.d.e](#)).

The ARRCC website also acts as a third space, because it invites the viewer to embody the transgressive quality of a climate activist. The “Advocate” tab offers various articles on non-violent action, discussions on the Adani coal mine, an instruction manual on how to talk to people about climate change, instruction on how to carry out a protest, and a place to order banners containing climate justice messages to place outside one’s place of worship. The webpage also invites viewers to participate in ARRCC’s many campaigns, such as “Eat Less Meat”, “Switch to Sunshine”, “Walk or Ride to Worship”, and “Go Fossil Free”. They also provide “Climate Action Kits”, each written for a specific religious community—namely Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, and Hindu communities. What is made clear is that climate action must go beyond individual change. ARRCC encourages viewers to mobilise their faith community to adopt sustainable practices and participate in non-violent direct action. The embodied techniques ARRCC endorses are of someone who is inspired by his or her faith to challenge climate injustices in their individual lives, communities, and societies.

ARRCC’s news section, which reports on recent ARRCC events or protest actions, further affirms the ways in which ARRCC members may embody the climate activist spirit. A significant portion of their news stories are “testimonials”, about how ARRCC members are enacting climate action, which are often accompanied by an image where a religious or multifaith organisation leader or attendees of an event holds a banner containing a message about climate change. These stories about normal individuals participating in climate action implicitly tell the viewers that they too can participate and that they will be accepted regardless of their religious backgrounds ([ARRCC n.d.b](#)).

The ARRCC website uses these stories to demonstrate how climate activism can be performed through a range of activities and protests. In one story, which is accompanied by an image of a large group of people holding out letters that spell out “Taking Care of Earth and Our Home”, ARRCC details the most recent Living the Change workshop. Another image depicts eleven people standing side by side on a dusty rural road, with two banners saying, “To Give Up Coal is Good for the Soul!” and “Protect the Planet Not Profits”. The story informs the reader that six of these people were arrested for blocking the gate into the Adani mine workers’ camp ([ARRCC n.d.b](#)). In another story strikingly titled “I Got Arrested For You”, a Quaker called Greg Rolles is shown suspended from a tripod scaffold over a railway line with a sign at the front saying, “this is an act of self-defence”. He discusses his recent arrest after blocking the railway that takes coal to the Abbott Point coal terminal, owned by Adani, and the importance of protest actions and civil disobedience. At the end of the article, he invites the viewer to act by saying, “if you are interested in joining actions on the frontline, please contact us on info@arrcc.org.au” ([Rolles 2019](#)).

7. Conclusions

The ARRCC website speaks to a broader network of relations to do with climate change denialism, religious diversity, and multifaith and environmental politics. Most of all, they are responding to the global challenge of the climate change emergency. We have shown that these issues run continuously between the online and offline realms. Understanding the interactions between online and offline multifaith activism is an area that ought to be explored further in interreligious studies. This paper has demonstrated how political and poetic sacred spaces, whilst being geographically present in a particular place, are also produced, circulated, owned, and contested in online spaces. It has also shown how these online spaces work implicitly to produce embodied modes of being that have the potential to mobilise individuals to become activists through the performance of transgressive acts, such as non-violent civil disobedience, or through performances of identity, such as becoming a vegetarian or placing a banner at one's place of worship.

The development of the online space has, therefore, significantly changed how societies interact politically. As we have noted, in some ways, this has led to the erosion of political engagement due to the individuated echo chambers of information, as well as issues related to the manipulation of the online realm for political or economic goals. Nonetheless, we have also demonstrated the ways in which the online sphere allows for greater political engagement. This is due to the immaterial and material structure of the online realm, which acts as a platform where digital third spaces may be generated. The ARRCC website acts as a third space, because ARRCC challenges narratives of climate change denialism and religious exclusivism and presents its viewers with an alternate narrative of multifaith climate activism. This encourages its viewers to also adopt an embodied modality of environmental conscientiousness and climate activism.

This embodied climate activist identity is generated by the ARRCC website's consistent invitations for viewers to take their digital activism into the real world. ARRCC describes many ways in which its viewers may perform their activist identities through the stories of other ARRCC members and guidebooks on how to run their own campaigns. Viewers are encouraged to be active participants in the politics of climate change by providing information on how to adopt a more sustainable lifestyle, how to encourage their religious community to do the same, and how to partake in, organise, and facilitate non-violent direct action. Furthermore, ARRCC allows its viewers to connect to a sense of the beyond by acting as a node of contact between the individual and the broader community of geographically dispersed members. ARRCC also mediates an experience of the sacred, by inducing a sense of wonder, peace, and awe through images of the natural world and sharing narratives of religious and moral obligations to participate in ecological care. By evoking religious motivations to take climate action, ARRCC is encouraging members to look beyond the traditional authority structures of government, to values of altruism and compassion based in religious traditions and reverence for the lifeworld.

In this way, ARRCC in its digital third space and real-world activism fulfils all of the main aims of the multifaith movement that [Halafoff's \(2013\)](#) research earlier set out, namely *developing understanding of diverse faiths and of the nature of reality*, specifically related to diverse teachings on the environment; *challenging exclusivity and normalising pluralism* by including and respecting many diverse faith perspectives; *addressing global risks and injustices*, particularly environmental risks and injustices; and *creating multi-actor peacebuilding networks for common [human and environmental] security*.

ARRCC is a distinct organisation that has learnt to use the online realm highly effectively. It has built a large multifaith network that connects a membership that is dispersed across Australia, and it has mobilised this multifaith community to take embodied action on numerous occasions. Therefore, ARRCC's mastery of the online space, as a third space for digital activism that inspires real-world action, may prove instructive to other multifaith and social movements to aid in their endeavours to achieve genuine *Netpeace*, acknowledging the capacity of critical and collaborative multi-actor peacebuilding networks to counter climate change more effectively together.

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