
IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE INTERNET...

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Abstract

In this paper, the author is studying the influence of the Internet, its capabilities and limits in shaping religion as we see it now. The Internet, as the fourth revolutionary medium (S. Harnad), has a paradigmatic influence on changes in modern society and culture. This influence roots especially in creating virtual reality and consequently in changes in such cognitive skills of man as: perception, imagination and thinking. This is all reflected in how religion is understood. Traditional religions are being changed under the influence of the Internet, but there are videogames where we see the most significant changes in religion. Here, we see the rise of new myths, rites or new communities, for example in a MMORPG videogame called *World of Warcraft*. Robert M. Geraci and J. Vallikatt speak of new virtual forms of the Sacred; these can saturate the spiritual needs of a hypermodern man. However, there is still a barricade between virtual and traditional religion – human body. Human body and mind is still a fundamental requirement for salvation (in Christian religion) or journey to freeing (in Buddhism). In contrast, virtual forms of the Sacred are not generated from the deeper memory structures of a human being, they are artificial, created outside and delivered through digital technology. This is the reason why they cannot significantly influence negative memory records that lie deeper in the human structure, records that need to be freed from (Buddhism) or purified (Christianity). Thus the Internet on one hand brings virtual forms of the Sacred into traditional religion, but on the other it cannot substitute the work with the body and mind, which is the *conditio sine qua non* for salvation in Christian religion or Freeing in Buddhism.

Keywords: Internet, virtual reality, World of Warcraft, religion, sacred

1. Introduction

The title of this paper, ‘In the beginning was the Internet...’, evokes the Prologue of John’s Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word...” (John 1.1). It was this Word, as the Gospel continues, that started everything. The Word – Logos – establishes the pattern or matrix that determines the world. These biblical words were used before the Internet was born also by K. Kraus and G. Anders to emphasize changes in culture and society, changes that came before we had press and television. W. Welsch [1] comments on this: “Karl Kraus (in the pre-electronic era) wrote: «In the beginning was the press and then the world

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appeared». In 1956, Günters Anders updated this statement to accommodate television and came with this sarcastic formulation: «In the beginning was the broadcast for which the world takes place».⁶ We can similarly think of important, or even paradigmatic changes in culture and society now, with the beginning of the Internet. For example, S. Harnad notes that the Internet is the fourth revolutionary form of media, following the spoken word, the written word and the printed word [S. Harnad, *Post-Gutenberg Galaxy: The Fourth Revolution in the Means of Production of Knowledge*, 5.11.2016, <http://cogprints.org/1580/1/harnad91.postgutenberg.html>]. T.H. Eriksen [2] even believes that the 21st century began in 1991, when the Internet was commercialised and came with World Wide Web (www). J. Lohisse [3], similarly to K. Kraus and G. Anders, speaks of the Internet as a new logo that influences the way new culture and society is shaped. According to J. Lohisse, each new form of media changes collective mentality and organisation of the society. This is the reason why we suppose that the Internet, similarly to the previous media [4], will influence changes in society and culture, and consequently also in religion, as it is their inseparable component.

The objective of this article is to find out what changes are brought by the Internet (and its platforms, application, online games and similar) in religion and more precisely, what possibilities and barriers come into religion with the Internet.

2. The Internet as a new existential dimension of man

The Internet is characteristic for its new global technological space (cyberspace), where we daily spend long hours communicating, learning, amusing ourselves and so on. At this time, cyberspace is becoming our new existential dimension, dimension that is, in contrast with traditional and real dimension, also called virtual dimension. Without doubt, the Internet is the most revolutionary form of media, because it offers not only a globally spread existential techno-dimension, but also brand new forms of communication [5]. Here are the four most important ones:

1. Network communication. Communication over the Internet is characteristic for its net-like, rather than linear combining of characters. Before the Internet, G. Deleuze and F. Guattarim [6] called this combining of symbols rhizomatic, to distinguish it from tree-like (arborescent) and hierarchy-based combining of symbols or information. In history, it was arborescent thinking that dominated in Philosophy; this was represented by Porphyrian Tree, but along this was also the Labyrinth [7]. The Labyrinth of the third kind was also called a network. Network-based communication on the Internet will favour associationistic thinking, rather than discursive thinking.
2. Speed of communication. On the Internet, the speed of communication is close to the speed of light, therefore it seems to be instant. This is the reason why the basic existential coordinates such as time and space are either

marginalized [1, p. 5], or not important. This influences not only our cognitive skills, sense of time (simultaneous time) and space (tele-vision and tele-presence), but also real life in the form of rapid changes in communication information, marketing and similar aspects.

3. Dominance of images. The Internet supports image-based communication, for example sharing photographs and videos, because these are easier to decode and communicate than text-based information. G. Sartori [8] even speaks of new anthropogenesis of man, with shift from *Homo sapiens* to *Homo videns*. Regarding new forms of media, A. Martinengo mentions the so-called pictorial turn [9]. Images in communication on the Internet will favour image-based thinking, emotion and entertainment [10].
4. Creation of a new language. The Internet also influences our language – in three different ways: a) Languages are infiltrated by English language; b) new simplified techno-language starts to appear [4, p. 180]; c) with new technology come also new words. These new terms are used daily, for example cyberspace, virtual reality, online, offline; they become a part of present-day culture. We use them also when we study the previous forms of culture. This means that the previous forms of culture will either be seen as archaic, almost incomprehensible, or will be transferred to new forms by using the Internet language.

The new existential dimension of man, also called cyberspace or virtual reality, as J. Lohisse [3, p. 176] mentions, will more and more visibly influence reality and consequently also religion.

3. Religion and media

If we want to clarify the Internet's influence over religion, we have to explain the very phenomenon of religion and consequently also how religion was shaped by the previous types of media, namely by the spoken word and the written word. Only then we can see clearly differences between traditional religion, shaped by the spoken word and the written word, and religion influenced by the Internet.

3.1. What is religion?

The definition of religion is outlined also by the etymology of the Latin word *religio* (*religare*), which means re-binding relationship with God (the sole supreme Being, etc.). Etymology of the word expresses the basic human existential situation because on one hand a man realises his mortality, on the other hand however, it is hard to simply accept this fact. So, people search for a way to achieve a holistic unity with God (the sole supreme Being), who transcends the imperfect human being. Transcendence of the human's destiny, called Salvation in Christian religion or Freeing in Buddhism, is the main goal here. Similarly, H. Bergson [11] speaks of the main objective in religion – dealing with human's death. However, every traditional religion contains a

number of components that cooperate and co-create the phenomenon of religion, for example teaching (doctrine), myths, rites, experience, institutions and material culture [12]. This all should only help to realize the main objective of religion – dealing with death.

3.2. Media's influence on religion

All traditional religions, Judaism, Christian religion or Buddhism, were first shaped by the influence of the spoken word, and later also by the written word. However, the spoken word and the written word are very different types of media, regarding both sense perception and structure or organisation of symbols. Regarding differences in sense perception, W.J. Ong [13] says that hearing is the deepest of the senses. The ear naturally perceives the depth, while the eye probes the surface. We can hear things that we may not see. The fact that human voice comes from inside the body encourages perception of hearing depth. Another difference is in the fact that hearing gives us a whole perspective, while sight breaks and isolates the objects. The structure of voice-based communication spreads not only in dimensional but also time unity because this is where memories of the past are brought into present. In contrast, the written word is an externalised and visual form of media; its basic structure relies on linear organization of symbols. Different sense perception and internal structure of these media has a great influence on forming of religion. The spoken word is a natural medium for religion because through its integrity and depth it supports typically spiritual phenomena such as unification of different dimensions so that they merge (the Otherworld and this world), the idea of cyclic time and similar concepts. The written word disintegrates this unity, breaks dimension into profane and sacral, makes time linear and sets a starting point for precise scientific thinking [4, p. 51].

It was primarily the spoken word that formed Christianity as one of the traditional religions. Jesus Christ spread the Gospel through spoken words, not written words. In the New Testament, there is just one mention of him writing in the sand (John 8.1-11). In John's Prologue, as we state in the beginning of this paper, is written "In the beginning was the Word..." (John 1.1). This all supports the idea of the spoken word being superior to the written word in religion. In addition, Christianity in the first centuries was pneumatic, which means it was spread under the influence of the Holy Spirit, including the gift of teaching, prophecy or tongues (Acts 2.1-13). There must have been a relation between manifestation of the Holy Spirit and the spoken word, otherwise we would not see any demonstration of the Holy Spirit. Both forms of communication (God's and human's) gave Christianity their characteristic features – sense of the Sacred, depth, tradition, authority, and fellowship [14]. The written word started to push its way into Christian religion in the second half of the first century, when Gospels started to be written. They, however, were still not significant before they were selected and canonized in the fourth century and especially from the High Middle Ages. Into Christianity, writing

gradually brought precision in thinking and possibility to create theological concepts, which (sooner or later) had to get some help also from Greek philosophy. Religion, formed by ‘words and Spirit’ gradually acquired a pendant in the form of written word, with emphasis on human’s rationality. This state of dichotomy graduated and in the Middle Ages turned into a conflict that we know as the conflict between reason and faith or Philosophy and Theology [14]. This conflict, though not as strong, has existed in Christianity ever since. Pope John Paul II dealt with this issue in his encyclical *Fides et ratio*.

Surely, in the past, Christianity was influenced also by other forms of media, for example book-printing, which helped to widely spread ideas of Christian religion in the social space. Martin Luther also recognised advantages of book-printing and spread his idea of reformation through books. We could similarly mention other media, but in this paper we are primarily focusing on the Internet, a medium par excellence. We are specifically interested in two questions: what forms of religion can be developed with the help of the Internet, and whether there is a boundary between traditional and Internet (virtual) religion.

4. Possibilities and limits for religion on the Internet

4.1. Possibilities for religion on the Internet

We can assume that the Internet, similarly to the previous media, with its net-based, instant communication, dominance of images and especially creation of a new language, will influence changes in modern-day religion. If we take language into consideration, language that is being shaped under the influence of present digital Internet culture, we can see it no longer compatible with the old theological and philosophical language. The young generation now habitually uses new words such as online, offline, chat, net, avatar and similar; through these words they view, understand and live their world. Understanding of the new world is underlain by image culture in the form of photographs, videos and similar. In opposition to this, theological terms such as mercy, salvation, sacraments and others, which originate in Judaism and Christianity of the Middle Ages are, for majority of today’s young generation, incomprehensible. Despite this language incomprehensibility, it seems, there is still something religious that persists, though in varying forms. M. Eliade calls all that persists *sacrum*, and continues that “*it is a fragment in the structure of consciousness*” or “*to be a human – or to become one first – means to be religious*” [15]. If then this *sacrum* meets with a new kind of communication medium, this *sacrum* gets somewhat changed. We can see this in film production (*Harry Potter*, *Avatar*, *Transcendence* and similar), where we find a number of spiritual elements. These are, however, interpreted to fit the modern technological and Internet world. Similarly, T. Halík notices that the modern media fulfil a whole scope of traditional functions of religion: they offer symbols, interpret world, offer shared experience, but also provide feasts and ecstatic experiences [16]. The modern

media, especially the Internet, are forming traditional religious phenomena in a new way. A specific feature of the Internet (apart from the already mentioned creation of a new language, dominance of images and network based - instant communication) can be seen in virtualisation of religion, concretely in creation of new forms of the virtual Sacred.

In the modern-day discourse, creating of new religious phenomena under the influence of the Internet is called *online religion*, while *religion online* is only understood to be a means of provision of religious information [14]. For our research work however, it is the first group - *online religion* – that is most important, because this is where religion is shaped and experienced on the Internet. We see the Internet here in a broader context, especially as a medium that offers a platform for creating another user platforms and, most importantly, for playing online videogames, which is the most important factor for our research work. Among all such videogames is one that is of a great importance – it is the MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) game called *World of Warcraft*. Robert M. Geraci states that “World of Warcraft offers its players many traditionally religious opportunities, including a community, a moral compass, a sense of identity and meaningful purpose, and transcendent experiences. With millions of users receiving these sacraments from *World of Warcraft* rather than from a traditional religious institution, there can be doubt about seriousness of the games’ religious implications.” [12, p. 32] Similarly, J. Vallikatt notices “*World of Warcraft* might fulfil the religious functions of creating worldviews, finding meaning, and exploring identity through an analysis of the game’s mythic content, ritual practices and online communities... *WoW* could be called ‘extraordinary religion,’ because it helps people to move beyond their everyday culture and concerns.” [17] According to Vallikatt, religion can be revived in the modern secular world through technologies, also for example in *WoW*. This new form of religion can satisfy spiritual needs of those who play it when they experience something extraordinary and find new form of the sacred in myths, rites and communities inside *WoW*. Vallikatt continues: “*WoW* is a context in which players are elevated to levels where they transcend their lives by participating in a mythic fantasy world, which provides them with meaningful texts, and in social settings where they build meaningful relationships“ [17, p. 201]. According to Vallikatt this is a religion in a new sense of the word: “It may not be religious in traditional sense, but is effervescent and meaningful and numinous“[17, p. 201].

Robert M. Geraci notices that *WoW* is an “active constituent of modern religious life, and it helps shape, authorize, and rewrite our religious practices“ [12, p. 9]. His statement is based on the assumption that new technologies, including videogames, can encourage new religious experience. He even believes that new technologies may saturate religious needs of a present-day, postmodern and secular man.

With such approaches we can agree. The cyberspace of digital media, and more specifically videogames, can indeed offer some new spiritual experience which goes beyond traditional religion and which can more or less saturate

spiritual needs of a modern man. However, it is still questionable whether it can replace traditional religions totally and if not, we can ask where the border between traditional and virtual religion is.

4.2. Limits of religion on the Internet

The Internet, as an interactive and virtual space, is a new living dimension for a human, a dimension that also influences him. Virtual forms found on the Internet should therefore not be understood as something imaginary, but real - to certain degree. J.D.F. Tuckett and David G. Robertson, referring to W.I. Thomas' and A. Schutz's ideas, point out that "if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" [18, p. 99]. This statement is based on a concept introduced by W. James, who claims that "real is the state that it exists in a certain relation to ourselves" [18, p. 88]. We can find these meaningful relations in videogames, therefore we should regard also them as real. Despite this, there is still a difference between reality described by a videogame and the reality of our world. This difference is expressed in our body, which cannot be virtualised but can, at most, be only partially connected to the virtual world.

Body is an irreplaceable component in regards to religion, because its existence is one of the conditions for Salvation in Christianity or Freeing in Buddhism. In Christian religion it is especially baptism through water and the Spirit that can happen only physically and not virtually. Salvation or reincarnation is not only a matter of the mind or soul, but also of the body. Apostle Paul says this "Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like us Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. ... Because we know our old human was crucified along with him to have the sinful body destroyed, to stop being slave to sin." (Romans 6.4-6) Consequently, salvation in Christian religion is reached in a living and real fellowship that is called Church. One can never baptise himself, the act of baptism is performed solely by priests. Among baptism, there is also the Sacrament of Penance, which can be also described as freeing from sins. The idea here is to realise one's sins (often hidden deep in the memory) and confess to them. Such an act of remission of sin cannot be done through virtual sacred, which is fed from the outside and which rather discourages us from real self-knowledge.

In eastern religions, for example in Buddhism, work with the body for example in the form of conscious breathing, concentration on a part of the body, is important and represents the path that leads to Freeing. In Buddhism, the greatest condition for Freeing is especially in breaking the mind free from negative bonds to various content that lies deep in the brain (in subconscious level). By degrees, through concentration and meditation, a Buddhist can block these bonds, some of which are connected to the body, until he finds the point where the total freeing is reached. Virtual forms of the sacred cannot substitute for work with one's own mind and body (concentration, meditation). Freeing (or Nirvana) even influences human body. M. Eliade comments here: "There are

symbols of death, reincarnation and consecration in Buddhist texts. Like in any consecration, a monk must create ‘a new body’, be ‘reborn’ when he ‘dies’.” [19] Though virtual reality may involve various cognitive processes, it cannot influence deeper self-knowledge, let alone freeing and transformation of the body.

In traditional religions, a human body is an irreplaceable part and condition for salvation, or path to freeing. It may be true that the body can be influenced through cognitive changes in virtual reality, yet mere experiencing of the sacred cannot constitute a sufficient condition to reach the spiritual goal – such as salvation in Christianity and Freeing in Buddhism. It is necessary to go deeper, free oneself from anything negative in the memory (remission of sins in Christian religion, freeing consciousness from the bondage in Buddhism). This requires concentration, meditation and contemplation. Virtual experience of the sacred can only produce cathartic effects, similar to those of theatre of the ancient Greece. We believe it is for this reason that human body remains a permanent barrier between traditional and virtual religion.

5. Conclusions

We wanted to show in this study that each form of media had and still has its unique share in a way they influence forming of religion. The spoken word, with its holistic approach, supported global structures, while the written word would differentiate and favour precision in thinking. The spoken word, as a form of media, was behind the birth of religions, while the written word recorded precise, or scientific thinking, which reflected in greater rationalization. Christian religion, for example, which has grown up upon oral tradition and written tradition, has long been stuck in a state of certain tension between faith and reason, or Theology and Philosophy. We have found out that new forms of media, such as the Internet, social media but, similarly to the previous sorts of media, also video games influence the way we see, understand and experience religion. We studied the influence of the Internet on religion specifically in the case of a MMORPG videogame called *World of Warcraft*. With the help of studies conducted by Geraci and Vallikatt, we have come to the conclusion that religion can acquire new sacral forms in the online space of video games. Gamers can see a variety of spiritual experiences such as myths, rites and forming communities. Despite this, there are still significant differences here that originate in human body. Human body is a physical object; it will therefore always stay outside the cyberspace of digital media. In traditional religions, say in Christianity, the body and mind constitute a condition for salvation (baptism, penance); in Buddhism it offers a path for freeing (conscious breathing, conscious walking). Therefore, religion is a phenomenon that is tightly bound to human body, including its inseparable parts such as mind and memory. Virtual reality may change cognitive skills in human and these can consequently influence human body, but virtual experiencing of the sacred has no deeper impact on human, self-knowledge and transformation. This is the reason why the

metaphor 'In the beginning was the Internet...' may only be valid in an ontic, absolute meaning of the word.

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