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## ON VIRTUAL REALITY OF RELIGION

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### **Abstract**

There is hardly any issue in current society that could be kept isolated from the phenomenon of mass media and their influence on people and society as such. Although religion in the past was able to get along without advanced technologies and carefully devised mass strategies, in the modern world it has found itself forced to react to the gradual ascent of mass media and the overall situation in society brought about by this development. In effect, our world and its latest developments have been moulded ever more significantly by the mass media. Considering the specific nature of religiosity and religion as cultural phenomena, the relationship between religion and mass media poses a number of questions, for instance: can this relationship work without religion losing anything? Or, perhaps, has religion been gaining from this alliance? As past predictions that religious ideas would quickly disappear in the light of scientific and technological progress have proven to be wrong, there is no other way for religion than to interact with the world of mass media. Religion can use the mass media for its own benefit as a means to react to the development of communication as such, thus expanding from social reality into virtual reality. That being said, religion can also conversely be used by the media for political and other purposes. This is chiefly why we ask questions pertaining to implications of the fact that religion has been extending into the virtual sphere as of recently, and also consider individual ways of how this process is being carried out, apart from its key effects and specifics.

*Keywords:* religion, virtual reality, virtuality, mass media

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### **1. Introduction - religion as cultural phenomenon**

Before engaging in any specific scientific pursuit, it is a matter of custom to define the object that is about to become the focus of the researcher's attention, to sketch a chart, into which we could, under given criteria, embed certain circumstances, situations, items and phenomena. This course of action is being required by the very nature of scientific research. Though, our first problem is the fact that it is not an easy task to define religion. This is obviously related to the multidimensional nature of religion as a phenomenon that could be viewed from various points, while it is immensely difficult to 'tame' these viewpoints by applying specific criteria due to the very multispectral character of the issue. Opinions admitting at least some, even though perhaps only relative

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feasibility of attempts to define religion, clash with views denying this possibility or even the very meaningfulness of such an endeavour, while there are also extreme notions considering religion to be only an academic, i.e. artificial term and a scientific construct designed to absorb, even with the use of some violence, individual cultural expressions of traditional societies and heritage of their ideas in order to make them subject of research – such a notion is being held, for example, by the professor of History of Religions at University of Rostock Klaus Hock [K. Hock, *What Is Religion?*, [http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/Hock\\_What\\_is\\_Religion3.pdf](http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/Hock_What_is_Religion3.pdf)]. These attitudes clearly reveal what their authors think of any attempts to define religion.

Russel Kirkland from University of Georgia speaks of religion as humanity's sensitivity to the ultimate meaning of existence, which derives from people's relations to a transcendent or super-empirical plane of reality. Comprehension of the meaningfulness of things serves to integrate harmoniously every aspect of one's being - cognitive, evaluative, motivational, and existential - and to provide the individual with orientation, purpose, and direction for his life. [R. Kirkland, *Defining 'Religion'*, <https://faculty.franklin.uga.edu/kirkland/sites/faculty.franklin.uga.edu.kirkland/files/RELDEFINE.pdf>].

A different definition is being rendered by the professor of Practical Theology at Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam R. Ruard Ganzevoort, who in his ponderings on the current situation of religion understands religion as „transcending patterns of meaning arising from and contributing to the relation with what is held to be sacred” [1].

A relatively ambitious attitude was taken by the Czech religionist Ivan Štampach, who offers an obviously easy definition, currently widely borrowed by teachers of religious studies in Slovakia: “Religion is a relationship of human person to a transcendent entity” [2]. Štampach further comments on and develops this definition, believing that it covers each display of religiosity in our world. Richard Schaeffler, a well-known philosopher of religion, however, distinguishes between religion and religions; with religion in singular being considered as an attitude toward life adopted by an individual and a way of life reflecting this attitude [3]. On the other hand, he considers religions as forms of common heritage or sets of traditions held by individual communities. Perhaps one cannot rush into concluding that this represents a regular definition, but it certainly is an attempt to make a general observation of individual features and phenomena proper to religion.

If we adopt Schaeffler's proposition of religions as specific forms of spiritual heritage peculiar for individual communities, we will also come to agree with the notion that this fact plays even greater role vis-à-vis our times marked by multiculturalism. Meanwhile, Victoria Harrison from University of Glasgow analyses key pragmatic circumstances of efforts to define religion in a multicultural world. She by far does not challenge religion by deeming it a mere artificial reduction of manifold cultural expressions. “Rather, we should embrace the more limited conclusion that it would be mistaken to assume that all

religions exhibit the same essential features” [4], she says. This obviously means that defining religion as such is a pretty tough nut to crack, so instead of making attempts to catch a fleeing hare by trying to grab its tail, we should focus on what really matters – apart from respecting the existence of truly unbridgeable gulfs between individual religious traditions and the fact that these traditions are not fully compatible, we should also realise that certain similarities cannot be denied. Harrison thus goes on to accept the concept of a family resemblance approach [4, p. 149], consisting of replacing stubborn efforts to set a general and fixed definition of religion for attempts to objectify undeniable similarities of individual religious forms.

That said, virtual reality of religion, in our view, should in fact be understood as virtual reality of various specific religious forms. In order to focus on virtual reality of religion, we need to take into account the aforementioned facts and deal with the term ‘religion’ with adequate pre-knowledge and understanding of difficulties in defining it. This article, on one hand, respects the fact that it is quite problematic to interpret the term ‘religion’, but on the other hand it assumes that it indeed does make sense to operate with some of its relevant definitions. In the following text, we will treat religion as a cultural phenomenon, using the term as a general description of any historically specific religious tradition – venturing to employ such an approach with respect to the background of the problem as described above, and also partly due to our assumption that the effort to define religion is really meaningful.

## **2. Religion and media**

Despite the tendency of recent decades to label religion as an obsolete powerhouse, which is retreating from its erstwhile positions, we have to concur with opinions challenging the self-confidence of such statements. Cheryl Casey from Champlain College wrote back in 2006 that “the currents of religious energy seem to be gaining strength, although these currents are taking on unaccustomed shapes” [5]. Although we concede that opinions observing a retreat of religion and irreversibility of the process of secularisation (the loss of influence by religion on individual spheres of public life) might appear as obvious, we at the same time feel the need to draw attention to the view of R.R. Ganzevoort, who stresses that instead of quite unilaterally highlighting secularisation, it would be far more appropriate to call the process as deinstitutionalisation. He believes that despite what might be a generally held contemporary impression, religion as such is actually not losing its power, while only institutions representing religious communities as sort of social organisations have suffered in fact [1, p. 99]. Ganzevoort is not alone in viewing this situation as a sociologically upheld fact. Stewart M. Hoover, director of the Centre for Media, Religion and Culture at University of Colorado Boulder, concurs, noting that people have not ceased to interpret the meaning of life in religious terms, but this inclination has instead become more individualised and transformed, with its focal point being shifted from the original institutional

ambit framed by an institutional authority to a personalised and individualised dimension [6]. This situation is closely related to the development of society in general and means of communication in particular. One cannot disregard the fact that general trust in ecclesiastic and religious authorities has declined. According to Ganzevoort, this fact, along with the assumption that religion as a cultural phenomenon will not vanish, leads to the re-institutionalisation of a deinstitutionalised religion [1, p. 100]. Nonetheless, this process is taking place outside religion itself this time, he notes. Along with Hoover [6, p. 32], he maintains that the sphere of mass media has emerged quite naturally as a one of the bases for such a process. One can hardly be surprised of this upshot, however, considering the actual capacity of mass media to exert influence on public opinion. Religion, figuratively speaking, has been seeking refuge in the media as of recently ever more often in Central Europe, too. This is apparently due to the fact that the media indeed seem to be more powerful than the traditional religious authorities.

An interested strategy for studying the relationship between religion and the media has been proposed by Liesbet van Zoonen from Erasmus University Rotterdam. She presents four ways for approaching the problem: similarity between the media and religion, distinction between these two spheres, mediatisation of religion and articulation between the media and religion [L. van Zoonen, *Four Approaches to the Study of Media and Religion*, <https://www.kent.ac.uk/religionmethods/documents/FOUR%20APPROACHES%20TO%20THE%20STUDY%20OF%20MEDIA%20AND%20RELIGION.pdf>].

Similarity between religion and the media can be observed in the fact that religion itself acts as a medium between an individual and the sacred – God or a transcendent absolute reality – while at the same time the media often present contents in a way that makes the latter into an object of a sort of worship or at least awarding the presented contents a certain deal of sacredness. On the other hand, when it comes to distinction between religion and the media, Zoonen points out that they are distinct ‘fields’, but at the same time one affecting the other. As for mediatisation of religion, we assume that the author basically thinks of “all processes of change that are media-induced or that are related to a change in the media landscape over time”, “changes in the media ecology that are linked to other large-scale social changes” [7], and changes in culture, politics, economy and communication. In effect, mediatisation of religion would involve effects of the mass media on religion, assuming that the (relatively new) media context needs to be taken into account as part of current reflections on religion. Meanwhile, articulation implies an encounter between the media and religion, with their relationship being in turn partly moulded by the fact that a religious community (as a recipient) interprets media contents and their forms, disassembling it to smaller components, which are subsequently integrated (appropriated) into its religious existential framework and its antecedent religious experience, with the religious entity appearing as an active recipient in the process. Such integration between the media and religion assumes the people

as the starting point, while the process is rather spontaneous and situational [L. van Zoonen, *Four Approaches to the Study of Media and Religion*].

From among the aforementioned approaches, our study appears to be the closest to the one based on mediatisation of religion, albeit it is by far not exclusively related to it. We take the primary interest in answering the question whether religion changes under the influence of mass media or not, considering that the mass media have long ago become a powerhouse on its own, with their strength eventually being even multiplied by their electronic presence, thereby entering all areas of social life, including the religious sphere. Finally, just like Z. Slušná states, the people alone as adherents of traditional religions, receiving the pop-cultural forms from mass media, may change the way they interpret some of the traditional phenomena [8] and thus may have, from a long term point of view, a relevant impact on traditional religions and their social dimension.

How do we then view the relationship between religion and the mass media in practice? We chiefly focus on how religion is made into content of media communication. First of all, we must distinguish between secular and religious media, as the two obviously pursue different goals in the process. The connection of secular media and religion can be classified according to criteria of formal purposes, involving a journalistic approach towards religion (news reporting and presentation of information concerning the latest developments related to a specific religion), documentary approach (audio-visual, visual and written documents with the purpose of educating the audience), and ‘screenwriting’ approach (involving religion or religious phenomena as thematic part of a specific story). The secular media of nowadays, especially regarding the journalistic approach, often suffer from their weakness which is concentration on religious topics appearing as more or less controversial – in last couple of years, for instance, Slovak mass media mention Islam almost exclusively in the context of terrorism [9].

Conversely, the connection of religious media and religion is essentially based on immediate extension of more or less established religious life into the media space. Even though none of the aforementioned three approaches pursued by the secular media can entirely be ruled out from the religious media (as especially religious television channels and radio stations not infrequently present newscast, documentaries and films with relevant themes), their primary purpose does not involve sketchy reporting on isolated religious phenomena. Instead, they seek to develop religious life on the media platform, sometimes presenting supplementary contents – i.e. programmes otherwise known from secular commercial and public-service media – that are immediately conducive to their primary goals.

### **3. Extension of religion in virtual world**

Discussing the extension of religion into a virtual world, it is useful to inquire at the same time about such terms as cyber-religion and digital religion,

as both are frequently being referred to when analysing the relation of religion to the mass media, especially the digital ones. We will attempt to clarify both terms later in the paper. The process of re-institutionalisation of religion in the form we are exposing in this paper makes religion more virtual at the same time. Meanwhile, a question has appeared as to whether the aforementioned virtual extension of religiosity is only a simple expansion of religion to a new soil, considering the development of mass media, i.e. whether this process represents a mere supplement to existing religion, or whether it is perhaps more substantial, in fact even

The issue of virtual reality has been playing an ever more existential role in the lives of individual people and society as such. Bearing in mind Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra, we do not want to be limited to viewing virtual reality as defined in most dictionaries and encyclopaedias, i.e. as an alternative three-dimensional world generated by computers. Instead, our broader concept based on media theories includes any depiction of reality by the media; we view simulacrum as a simulative phenomenon, or a simulation, if you will, appearing always when reality is re-constructed (also by the mass media) with the use of symbol systems [10]. Baudrillard postulates that simulation as the way of how reality is depicted on television, in cyberspace and virtual reality (simulating this reality in fact) even acts as an organisation form of postmodern society [*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ baudrillard/>]. This reality constructed by the media can be called hyper-reality, principally when one fails to notice that simulated reality has infiltrated objective reality. Nonetheless, we should not let be confused here; even though it is simulated reality, we cannot challenge in any way its ontological and epistemological status as objective reality [10, p. 62], not even when some specific imitation of reality begins displaying phantasy features, considering that people can taste the same kind of experience in virtual space, including reality constructed by the media, as they do in objective reality [10, p. 64]. In addition, the existence of the phenomenon of virtual and simulated reality as evident part of culture is also beyond any doubt.

If we include secular media into our consideration, religion seems to be displayed most authentically there when appearing as a theme in narrative media products, including entirely fictional stories. We do not refer here to objective and real authenticity, as we do not apply the term 'authenticity' exclusively to objective material and sensual conditions, understanding that experience from virtual reality presented by a film, for example, need not be any less authentic than experience originating from everyday empirical reality. We observe that narrative concepts and film production are able to create strongest appeals on human emotions and moral attitudes. For an atheist recipient, the religious element in such works can become a 'mere' topic of debate, but for a believer it not infrequently becomes an epic confirmation of their own religious values. Robert A. White demonstrates this process on the example of Latin American telenovelas, echoing German Rey's (2004) notion that the genre provides a good indicator of Latin American religiosity in general, portraying sharp moral

contrasts between good and evil, with the narrative evolving toward the punishment of evil and triumph of good and justice, while this obviously does not always work out like that in reality. According to White, telenovela does not aspire to provide a faithful portrayal of objective reality, but it rather serves as a theological statement [11], mirroring religious feelings and religious ways of grasping reality instead.

From our point of view, telenovelas display certain features typical for the religious media. However, the purpose of the latter is not to encourage a broad debate in society, but primarily to stimulate activities within the given religious community and provide the faithful with a platform for expanding their religious lives. This process can take place in the print media, traditional electronic media, such as television and radio, and also in digital media – even though it needs to be noted that the relationship between the internet media and religion has some pitfalls that prevent its further development. Nonetheless, this very fact makes the relationship even more interesting at the same time.

We observe that religion has already found a firm ground in the print media, television and radio, as exemplified by several religious media on a relatively small Slovak media market (including *Katolícke noviny* weekly newspaper, Radio Lumen and Catholic television channel Lux). Conversely, the relationship between the internet media and religion is different in many aspects. First of all, the internet provides far broader options for communication than television and radio, but at the same time the element of interactivity present on the internet also creates a more spontaneous and less controllable media environment than offered by the aforementioned media of one-way communication. Although there are quite a few theoreticians asking whether perhaps the interactive environment of the internet does not dissolve religious traditions, at the same time modifying certain religious attitudes, there has emerged a number of Christian and other religious websites that are obviously highly comfortable with the internet environment. One such example is the Catholic.org website [Catholic Online, <http://www.catholic.org/>] designed to serve Catholics worldwide. This virtual space offers options for performing various religious activities that could have traditionally been carried out only in real life: besides finding readings from the Bible, inspirational articles and prayers, the faithful can also encounter there an internet shop with religious items and cards, light virtual candles to symbolise their prayers, share the candles and call on others to join them in common prayers, send ‘prayer requests’, asking others to pray for specific intentions, and send donations for various purposes. The MountainWings.com website [MountainWings.com, [http://www.mountainwings.com/prayer\\_request.html](http://www.mountainwings.com/prayer_request.html)], for its part, provides similar opportunities for sending prayer requests and donations. Meanwhile, there is also virtual reality of religion par excellence as provided within the Second Life website [Second Life, <http://secondlife.com/>] – an online virtual world featuring well-nigh all aspects of human life in society, thereby allowing the ‘residents’ to live a ‘second life’ in the cyberspace. Second Life includes religious practice and rituals, religious places etc. Virtual religious services are

also being offered each Sunday by the ALM Cyber Church [ALM Cyber Church, <http://almcyberchurch.org/?pg=world>]. The cyber-churches work on the basis of 3D simulation of real space-time, with the faithful entering the virtual churches via their own avatars. We believe that this form of religious practice and rituals most closely corresponds to the discussed virtual reality of religion. While we maintain that religious programmes on television and radio, including religious television channels and radio stations, do not seek to compete with traditional religious practice (with the exception of media defying traditional interpretations of a given religion, such as those inspired by postmodern esoteric currents), the situation in the sphere of digital media is far less unequivocal. This may be related to the blurring of boundaries between the virtual and real world as discussed above, with people effectively becoming ‘virtual creatures’. Perhaps one day it can really happen that religiosity lived virtually (i.e. ‘cyber-religiosity’ and ‘cyber-religion’) will be competing with traditional ways of religious practice as embedded in everyday empirical life. On the other hand, a danger for religion may be spotted in this form of religiosity – among the others, S. Gálik spots it as well: he alleges, examining the relation between Christianity and new media, that an internet pushed to extremity (as one of the new media) can have a negative impact on human ability of abstract thinking and that there is no compatibility between the internet and Christianity, hence, media education is needed [12].

#### **4. Conclusions**

At the beginning of the last chapter, we rendered the term ‘digital religion’. Heidi A. Campbell understands this term, along with S. Hoover, as “religion that is constituted in new ways through digital media and cultures” [13]. This is a new understanding of religion that is subject to outreach by digital technologies (mediatisation). Therefore, the term digital religion is marked by religious traditions and historical religious context (the offline dimension), as well as the digital media and technologies (the online dimension) [13]. So, digital religion is a religion disposing of media (virtual) forms of religious practice as shaping its virtual reality, while these media forms influence some of the religion’s key elements, thereby actually reconstituting it as such. We believe that this process is increasingly more natural depending on the depth of penetration by the media, chiefly the digital ones, into traditional structures of a given religion. Christopher Helland notes that individual believers tend not to make any distinction between their everyday religious actions carried out in an empirical environment and virtual religious practice performed online, considering the internet to be natural part of their day-to-day lives, which are determined by their religious worldviews [14].

Apart from that, we think that digital religion could be viewed as a peculiar new way of how religiosity can be displayed. Meanwhile, the question as to whether this could be considered a legitimate or perhaps a legitimised form of religiosity should probably be conveyed rather to theologians. Meanwhile, it



is a matter of course that a religious tradition undergoing a virtual transformation necessarily loses something in the process; at the very least its original communal proximity and the magic of being present at rituals performed in real time and space – ‘here and now’. These are obvious imperfections in the virtual rendering of religion, with Ruard Ganzevoort noting that others include losses in terms of the meaning and functionality of a given religion. Nonetheless, it is also possible to concur with his view that religions can profit in the process as well, for example in gaining new vitality and critically engaging with traditions from which they originated [1, p. 117]. The concept of digital religion offers a relatively wider scope for individual religious development and thanks to the possibility of dealing critically with some of the religion’s traditions it also provides opportunities for developing a more open interreligious dialogue.

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