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Virtuality as a Religious Category?

Continuity and Discontinuity Between Online and Offline Catholic Monasteries

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Abstract

This paper seeks to investigate the category of virtuality in order to show the affinities it presents with religious practice or tensions it can create with it. This study takes the case of Catholic monasteries and especially different propositions of 'invisible' and 'virtual' monasteries. The first ones are spiritual and immaterial links which aim to create a communion of prayer. The second one, such as the German monastery of Funcity, are propositions for religious practice online carried by monks and nuns who want to make monastic life present on the Internet and permit a religious practice online for people who cannot / do not want to go to a monastery: services online, chats with a monk. How are these propositions received in the monastic world? Which consequences can they have on the real monastic life? And what are the questions that a religious online practice asks? This paper is based on the study of virtual monasteries and interviews with monks and nuns.

Keywords

Internet, monasticism, virtuality, religious practice

1 Introduction

Studies on the internet and the new practices it engenders often oppose two categories: the 'virtual', associated to the worldwide web, and 'reality', *i.e.* everything that takes place outside the digital world. The world on line, intangible and a priori disincarnated,[1] seems to entertain an ambiguous

1 This first impression would deserve to be questioned anew, *cf.* article by Antonio Casilli 2009, 'Culture numérique:

and poorly defined relationship to reality. But is the opposition as straightforward as all that? Where does virtuality begin, where does it end? The question naturally implies many things concerning the possibility (or not) to reproduce the religious on the web. When religions enter the Net, they frequently trigger – often on the part of believers more than of the churches themselves – strong views about the supposedly fundamental contradiction between the characteristics of the internet and those of religion. But at the same time, it is impossible to ignore the ever-growing presence of religious activities online. Should this lead us to imagine that a certain elective affinity exists between the two domains? That might explain why religious institutions were so rapidly attracted to the web.

In order to examine the relations that prevail between the world of the web and offline realities as far as religious matters are concerned, we will be concentrating here on the case of Catholic monasteries and their online activities. Given their extramundane situation and monks' 'virtuoso' status, in Max Weber's sense of the word, they are a particularly interesting subject for study. But in order to grasp where the two domains intersect, we shall also be calling upon fieldwork and interviews carried out with monks and nuns (off-line). The world of the web cannot be fully understood without shuttling back and forth between observing what transpires on the web and hearing what the persons in charge of the websites, or the users, have to say.

After showing the sorts of links that can bring the religious and the virtual together, we will attempt to determine the forms of continuity or discontinuity existing between the online and offline spheres. Lastly, we will examine online practices more closely to see in what ways they can be self-sufficient or on the contrary must be completed by other practices off-line.

2 Religion and virtuality: an elective affinity?

2.1 A rapid fascination for the Web in every shape and form

The first thing to be said about the way Catholic monasteries relate to the world of the web is that the arrival of religious communities on the internet was rapid and massive. Today, 56.5% of French Catholic monasteries possess a website and 22.8% have a page hosted on another site. Which means that 79.3% are present on the web. Those who aren't are generally small priories with fewer than ten or even five members. As to Austrian monasteries – much more intramundane due to their activities (schools, parishes) – 81.8% of them own a website (Jonveaux 2013). Also, compared to

l'adieu au corps n'a jamais eu lieu', *Esprit*, vol. 353, pp. 151-153.

other institutions, the monastic communities arrived on the web relatively quickly. Of the 55 French monasteries identified on *abbayes.net* which possess a website, six had created it between 1996 and 1998 (the average year for the 55 communities being 2001). The fact that religious groups adopted the internet so promptly proves that, despite the difficulties discussed below, the internet partly corresponds to what they were basically looking for. In fact, being present on the web is part of a congregation's way of relating to the world and participates in the logics that the monasteries have always tried to establish between their geographic base and the symbolic dimension, and the obligation to communicate and bear witness. Besides, monasteries had already partly experienced the problems connected to the introduction of the internet when the printing press was invented, which the monks – early on compared to laymen – were able to put to use profitably for their ministry (Eisenstein 1991, p.26), as was later the case with the invention of the telephone (Sastre Santos 1997, p.904). According to Max Weber, monasteries are the ideal-type of extramundane religious life:

> for such a concentration [excepting acts connected to the search for salvation] may make it seem necessary to create a formal separation from the 'world', from the social and mental attachment to family, possessions, political, economic, artistic, erotic interests, from all things connected to reality in general, any practical implication in such attachments signifying an acceptance of the world, which estranges one from God: *asceticism means rejecting/refusing the world*. (Weber 1996, p.194)

But, though that independence with respect to the world is a necessity in order to be able to lead a contemplative existence, communicating with the world is also necessary to spread the utopian message. Caught up in that dialectic, the monasteries have always tried to develop their links to the world without jeopardizing their geographic stability. Paradoxically, though often keeping to the outskirts of social life and cut off by concrete – or symbolic – barriers, the monastery seeks to remain in constant touch with the world through prayer. Internet thus allows the monks to be present in the world while staying within their walls.

It must be added that the linkage afforded today by the internet between geographically distant communities was also an early feature of the monastic universe which, since the Middle Ages, has formed its houses by congregations and orders, weaving a huge, spiritual and commercial web throughout Europe, first, then across the world (Clair 2004). The web gives new visibility – only somewhat more tangibly – to an already existing set of connections. To a certain extent it is not a chance occurrence that monastic communities should have invested the world of the web relatively early on, since in some ways it corresponds to certain monastic features. But is this circumstance merely a convergence between the monastic system and the internet's *modus operandi* or, more significantly, does an elective affinity exist between the religious and the virtual spheres?

2.2 Questioning the virtuality of online activities

To be able to ascertain if the spiritual sphere presents characteristics similar to those of the online world, one must first ask oneself how to qualify that world, so often reduced simply to being 'virtual'. True, it is difficult to define the category to which the web belongs. One speaks indifferently of virtuality, online reality, or yet again of cyber-reality. But, as Antonio Casilli[2] has pointed out, by calling the world of the web 'virtual', the risk is to assign to it the connotation of falseness partly contained in the French term *virtualité*. Whence the concept of "heavy reality",[3] coined to designate the world off-line but also, *i.e.*, the distinction between "physical or material" and "informational" spaces. (Casilli 2010, p.60)

The *Littré* dictionary's definition of the French word *virtuel* is: "merely potential, having no actual effect".[4] In this sense, *virtualité* is that which does not actually exist, has no direct influence on reality, or requires to be transformed in order to become effective. But can one really say that declarations made or acts carried out on the web have no effect on reality? Where a website such as *Second Life* is concerned, words and actions do remain potential: a marriage contract signed there theoretically has no effect off-line. But shopping on-line has very real consequences, if only on one's bank account! The distinction between these different sorts of acts – we shall return to this later – is like the difference between what resembles a game (remaining in a parallel, closed-off world) and what does not (Waltermathe 2011). The anonymity made possible on-line also allows isolating an act by limiting its consequences in the other areas of social life. A person participating in a forum under cover of a pseudo, can thus 'play' at having an identity that does not impact his/her existence off-line.

> Communications transiting by a computer in real time are charming at first because they allow you to remain anonymous and talk freely without having to take each other's physical appearance into account. Since having fun is the top priority with many internet users, they opt for a graphic and sound interface that enhances playful communications. (Verville & Lafrance 1999, p.182)

Though the dematerialization of the world of the web a priori gives the impression there has been a clean break with the world off-line – shielding a space where things will remain merely 'potential' – it is above all the intentions of the users, or the types of acts, that permit (or do not permit) establishing a clear-cut separation between the two spheres.

2 During the discussion following the paper read at the AFSR conference on February 5, 2013.
3 Term mentioned by Antonio Casilli, *idem*.
4 We limit ourselves here to the sociological nature of virtuality in religion on the internet, leaving aside the exciting philosophical debates surrounding the issue of virtuality.

2.3 The spiritual and the virtual: opposition or convergence?

Concerning the possibility of actually living out one's religion on the internet, several interpretations come to mind. Some theologians assert that internet as a medium is not structured to match all the aspects of the Christian faith. Andrea Grillo explains, for instance, that

> the internet can *represent* all four of the actions on which the Christian faith is based, but can actually *perform* only one: listening to the Word – and perhaps partly perform a second: sharing the fruit of the earth. But it has no hold over the third and the fourth – praying and the breaking of the bread – which are excluded from its virtual world precisely because the representation it can give of them is possible, but inadequate. (Grillo 2002, p. 121)

A fundamental reason for this might be that "in its immediacy, the internet instantly appears very far removed from an act of faith" (Grillo 2002, p. 121). Similarly, a survey bearing on an online Lent retreat has shown that the organizers – Dominicans based in Lille – deplored the lack of commitment that anonymity generates, as well as the difficulty to exert control. In 2007, in view of several declarations posted on their forum that violated the teachings of the Church (Jonveaux 2007, pp.157-176), they shut it down entirely.

Conversely, the religious sphere resembles the world of the internet in many respects. In the first place, it must be pointed out that 'virtuality' as a category is not foreign to religion; it also figures in Christian theology. The *Dictionary of Catholic Theology* (*Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*) provides a definition of the term 'virtual' that broadly speaking designates an "effectively operational influence, though it is neither immediately observable nor instantaneous" (Angles 1931). That definition takes into account its actual effects on reality. The theologian also acknowledges 'virtual intent' when administering the sacraments, thereby designating the real intent connected to the ritual even if the person administering the sacraments is not aware of it. Virtual intent suffices to recognize the validity of the sacrament, which does therefore potentially affect reality.

Also, the intangible links implied by praying can be associated to virtual connections since one does not see the person one is communicating with and that it is unlikely one will run into him/her in the flesh in this life... That sort of transcendence, that both goes beyond reality but at the same time has no hold over it, comes close to the virtuality of the internet, about which it used to be frequent to mention the "religious and mystical dimension" (Breton 2000, p.17). And one talks about the new religiosity of the new social ties in the new society that the internet is capable of building, in a "new cult once again dedicated to communication" (Breton 2000, p.48).

Antonio Casilli (2010, p.57) declares that

> from now on it will be impossible to assert that the only real communities are those who share a geographic base. Face to face encounters are no longer the only forms of interaction.

But the type of link observed in online communities is not unlike the one described by the believers in invisible communities. Well before the invention of the internet, so-called 'invisible monasteries' existed: these were communities that prayed for the same cause but without any material connection between them. Nearly every French and Belgian diocese has this sort of intangible structure, one of whose main functions is to pray for pastoral vocations. The website of the Diocese of Versailles explains that the invisible monastery "brings together all those who, in our diocese, promise to pray every day for priests' vocations".[5] For the site *mavocation.org*, the invisible monastery is a

> large, 'invisible' community that offers up daily prayers for the pastoral and religious vocations the world so sorely needs. An Invisible Monastery, as its name implies, lives nowhere except in the hearts of the faithful.[6]

There is therefore no formal commitment or possibility to know who belongs to the community. Membership consists exclusively in the individual's own conviction of belonging. The hypothesis of a "community devoid of physical contiguity", which typified online communities according to Peter Forster (quoted by Casilli), fits online communities of practice perfectly (2010, p.57). A congregation of invisible monasteries whose members say that prayer alone connects them, immaterially and intangibly, thus exhibits very real similarities with what members of virtual communities on the web – religious or not – claim. Described in this way, virtuality becomes a genuine religious category.

3 Religious continuity and discontinuity of digital and physical spaces

Once admitted that virtuality is not completely foreign to religion, one must delineate the zones of continuity or on the contrary of discontinuity that may appear in the spheres of offline and online religiosity. That should allow us to decide whether the web is a totally autonomous space, irreducible to any other, or whether a form of continuity exists with respect to offline reality.

5 Eglise Catholique en Yvelines 2015, viewed 21 January 2013, <http://www.catholique78.fr/le-monast%C3%A8re-invisible-005309>.

6 Ma Vocation 2015, viewed 20 January 2013, <http://www.mavocation.org/aider-vocations/prier/124-monastere-invisible/1226-monastere-invisible.html>.

3.1 The virtual presence of the *virtuosos* of extramundane asceticism

The presence of monastic communities on the web, as well as the individual use of the media by monks and nuns make them worry about how to protect their extramundanity. Is their extramundanity jeopardized when monks are present in the world thanks to the abbey's website, a chat on an online monastery or Facebook? Or again, are they only in the world 'potentially'? Our interviews show that many monks consider the internet an opportunity to be present in the world, especially for evangelizing purposes, without leaving their walled bastion. In this sense, the internet represents an extramundane manner of being present in the world while preserving their specific status of virtuosos outside the world. Thanks to the internet, not only are the monks' circles of communications enlarged, they also have ever greater opportunities to access libraries or teaching at a distance as well as a variety of other services.

Nevertheless, the monks also declare that it is necessary to supervise and control the use of digital media in monastic life because they are liable of compromising one of the most fundamental monastic characteristics: being able to distance oneself from the world. As a Benedictine monk from Lérins put it, "we may leave our cells or maybe our monasteries less, but virtually we're a lot more outside" (Frère Marie & Frère Césaire 2008, p.280). That so-called 'virtual' presence in fact possesses many of the attributes of an offline presence, as the drawing up in practically all the monasteries of community or individual rules to regulate the use of the media illustrates. The online presence of the monks thus impacts the off-line realities of their monastic life. The rules set up most often pertain to time and space, *e.g.* specific computer rooms that preclude being connected in the individual cells, or a rule that requires turning off the network between the last evening service and the first morning mass. During an interview in 2010, the novice master at the Benedictine Abbey in Solesmes said: "It would of course be completely paradoxical were one able to access the internet in one's cell". Or, to quote an Austrian Cistercian nun in 2011: "With the internet and the telephone I'm constantly on the outside. But they too are a wall. And it's not agreeable." Which is why she refused to have a computer in her room. To all intent and purposes, browsing the internet is considered the same as leaving the enclosure of the monastery. The controls to prevent it connect online and offline spaces directly, and as a consequence they are in a relationship of continuity. These observations also illustrate the fact that "clearly, we readily associate communication and information to the notion of *space*" (Casilli 2010, p.19).

3.2 The points where online and offline communities connect

What are the connections between the invisible – or virtual – relation to the community and the link anchored in 'heavy reality'? In fact, it is because connections exist that online reality is not purely

virtual – 'potential' – but can impact offline reality. According to Morten T. Hojsgaard (2005, p.60), there is no pure cyber-religion: "most religious communication on the internet is not cyber-religion; rather it involves real people, real places, established institutions, and so forth". Likewise, online monastic communities are of necessity connected – to a greater or lesser extent – to real individuals.

Among the different forms of Catholic monastic communities present on the internet, we can pinpoint three types of connections to the offline world. First, monastery websites – which may sometimes also offer religious services – are directly connected to an existing and institutionally recognized community. The second type of connection corresponds *e.g*. to the virtual monastery of the German website of *Second Life*, 'Funcity'. Founded in 2008, the monastery has no connection with any offline establishment, but depends nevertheless on male and female clergy of various orders who make up this type of online community. On the site, one can enter the monastery's 'rooms' and meet all the spiritual guides forming the new community in this environment. The third and last type of monastery on the web is one that has no connection to any offline community or to any real male or female clergy having pronounced their vows institutionally. For example, the 'Monastic Order of Brothers and Sisters of the Internet' (*Ordre monastique des frères et sœurs de l'Internet, OMFSI*), which visibly was not very successful since it shut down in 2012, had no link to any form of offline religious life. It was a self-proclaimed, virtual, monastic order without any canonical recognition (though such recognition is obligatory to have the right to use the name 'monastery'). Thus, the internet somehow reproduces or constructs a form of reality. What is presented on-line corresponds more or less precisely to the physical reality supposedly being reproduced. Be that as it may, as M. Waltemathe (2011, p.88) forcibly declared, "a virtual world can only open up thanks to acting in this world". And the connections that will then exist between the two worlds can also be of different sorts.

3.3 The right 'dosage' between online and offline religion?

In the first two cases – websites connected to offline communities or managed by clergy who live in real communities – the posture as to whether to promote continuity or discontinuity between the two spheres differs depending on the actors. For example, Sister Ruth Schönenberg, a German Benedictine spiritual guide for the Funcity monastery, is happy that users come to visit her in her geographic community (2009, p.432), for that creates a form of "physical closeness". The design of the so-called 'on-line monastery' (*Onlinekloster*) itself imitates the architecture of the Maria Laach Abbey in Germany. On the other hand, the Dominicans of *Retraite dans la Ville* ('Urban Retreat') insist that online practice must continue, as a prelude to another sort of practice offline. The purpose of limiting that proposal to the periods of Lent and Advent is to steer users towards offline practices. The spiritual guidance offered on their site is totally anonymous and users do not have the

possibility of knowing who is the Dominican guiding them. An anonymous e-mail address is created for the occasion. Dominicans thus purposely reduce the points where online practice and offline reality intersect, not in order to isolate the online from the offline world but to incite surfers not to limit their practice to the web. As Brother Pascal declared in an interview in 2006: "we are not meant to live in a virtual world". The Cistercians of Heiligenkreuz (Austria), who have developed various types of presence on the internet – a webpage, Facebook profile, Twitter account and You Tube channel – also deliver the following message at the end of each of their videos: '*Come and see*'. Thus, monastic life cannot be experienced exclusively on-line and, in Casilli's way of thinking, requires a follow-up in 'physical reality'. Online and offline experiences are therefore complementary, though the latter can be self-sufficient but not the former. That means that, in order to be completely fulfilling, the digital world must necessarily – at least where religious practice is concerned – be connected to an offline counterpart.

4 Online practices: a 'potential' religion?

The preceding observations naturally open up onto the question: what is the meaning of online practice? Does it have the same symbolic effectiveness for its users as offline practice? The Dominicans of 'Urban Retreat' (*Retraite dans la Ville*) do not seem to share that point of view, since they want to restrict it to certain times of the year. But let us see more precisely how offline practice can also remain potential or on the contrary have the same sort of 'validity' as online practice.

4.1 Between recreational religious practices and virtual intent

A feature of prayer being its insubstantial nature, it is hardly surprising that religions rapidly discovered how to offer a way of praying online. But such a practice poses several questions and in particular, given the forms found on the internet, the question of their seemingly inherent playfulness. Games are a sort of 'potential life', a life that's not 'for real'. In his book on the use of the computer for religious education, Michael Waltermathe (2011) explains that using a computer is always something of a game – simply using the mouse or the contrast between the gesture and the effect produced are amusing. What of the playful side when a user of Funcity goes from the Town Hall where he/she just got virtually married to a chapel where he/she can light a candle in one click? The question seems to arise especially in cases where much interactivity is involved, less when the internet is being used only to obtain information – for pedagogical purposes or praying – or as a spiritual link to a community. In the case of praying, it is not the prayer itself that is being done by

the internet. As testimony posted on the website illustrates, when the users of 'Urban Retreat' say they light candles around their computer to create an atmosphere conducive to prayer when listening to a service online, the computer and the internet are being used as supports not very different from a book for instance. In this sense, there is total continuity with offline reality and online reality is only one tool among others. According to the types of online practices proposed, or the sorts of uses to which the internet is put, there will be greater or lesser continuity and its playful side will be more or less significant. Online practice can in fact use the medium either simply as a support or as an interactive space, *i.e*. as a simple aid to prayer or as a way of mediating the prayers themselves. In the last analysis, like for everything else in tangible reality, only the actor's intent determines the effectiveness of their act, even if the internet in itself invites playing.

4.2 What of symbolic effectiveness?

On-line religious practice inevitably raises the question of the symbolic effectiveness of virtual practices, in particular concerning dematerialized rituals, as in lighting a candle online as mentioned above. In religious contexts, there are various definitions of validity. The first is the one defined by the institution, the theological point of view, while the second is anthropological and corresponds to a symbolic efficacy that allows a ritual to attain its target and become reality because "the individual believes it and belongs to a society that also believes it" (Lévi-Strauss 1958, p.2018).

Religious practice on the internet first of all elicits questions from the institution as well as from believers as to what is or is not 'valid'. In Catholicism, conditions for administering the sacraments are defined by canon law.[7] For example, canon law refuses to validate a confession if the two actors participating in the ritual are not physically present. For that reason, online confessions are not institutionally valid and consequently are forbidden. The question nevertheless arose when believer-internet users wanted to confess online, especially within the framework of the spiritual guidance offered on 'Urban Retreat' (Loppinet 2005, p.268). The religious institution apparently considers that not everything can be done on-line.

Symbolic efficacy particularly concerns the effects of ritual, *i.e.* whether or not it has reached the desired objective, divine persuasion for instance. Lighting a candle in a church by someone who cannot find the words to talk to God represents praying. The flame that rises, the light it sheds, its fragility when it wavers, are just so many sensorial signs of the message sent to God. What of a virtual candle? The question of symbolic effectiveness means that, for a believer, it can produce the same effect on God. In this case, as in all rituals, believing is what defines the efficacy of the act. F.-

7 On the sacraments and symbolic efficiency, we recommend the volume by François-André Isambert 1979, *Rites et efficacité symbolique*, Le Cerf, Paris, in particular the chapter on the unction of the sick.

A. Isambert (1979, p.24) points out that a sacrament "*signifies the effect it is supposed to produce*". But that belief is also based on a tradition, a shared memory – "belonging to a society that also believes it" (Lévi-Strauss) – that testifies to the moments when its effectiveness was actually demonstrated. Such is *e.g.* the case of miracles in the Christian faith, when efficacy turns from symbolic to practical. However, in the case of religious practice on the internet, there is as yet neither tradition, nor memory, nor any 'miracle on the Net' that might prove to the believer that their act online achieved its religious goal. Only their own, personal belief can allow them to evaluate the symbolic effectiveness – or not – of their act. Online practices consequently raise serious questions as to these rituals' effectiveness and how they are perceived by believer-users. The same question was asked by Lorne Dawson about the online reproduction of neo-pagan religious practices:

> Can the simulated dancing of computer-bred 'avatars' provide the sensate stimulation of real bodies swaying to the rhythm of a chant while circling an altar lit with many candles? The answer hinges on the degree to which this kind of religious experience requires the full stimulation of our senses. (Dawson 2005, p.17)

Despite some continuity with respect to the offline religious sphere, the online world is in the process of building a set of practices or rituals whose symbolic effectiveness is still subject to debate and will only be confirmed little by little, as they make their way into communities and collective memories.

4.3 Is God on (the) line?

The fact that the digital medium makes religious practice possible also questions the perception of divinity in a digital environment. In today's monotheistic religions, the divine is essentially insubstantial in the sense that God is not seen, cannot be touched, etc. He has been amply represented in the Christian religion, and those images are relayed by the web the same as by other visual media. But the possibilities to practice on-line, by their very intangibility seem to place the divine in an ambiguous position. The prayers posted online, especially on the social networks, at first sight imply that the believer thinks God accesses them through the same medium, and that he himself is therefore present on the web.[8] The interactivity of Web 2.0 compounds the interrogations

8 The Facebook profiles of Austrian clergy male and female were researched in a survey published by Isabelle Jonveaux 2013a, 'Facebook as a monastic place? The new use of the internet by Catholic monks', in T Ahlbäck (ed), *Digital Religion. Based on papers read at the conference arranged by the Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History, Åbo Akademi University, Åbo/Turku, Finland, on 13 - 15 June 2012*, Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis 25, Donner Inst. for Research in Religious and Cultural History, Åbo.

surrounding such a perception of online divinity. For instance, the oratory of the Funcity monastery proposes a prayer 'Just for you'. One has only to click on the candles for a prayer, presented as having been chosen 'just for me', to appear. In fact, several clicks obtain a different prayer every time. It is tempting then to see a divine purpose rather than a computational algorithm in the choice of that prayer – a sign from God. Is God in the internet? Does he talk to us through the 'chance occurrence' of computational algorithms? Just as the Bible did not fall open to *that* page at Saint Augustine's feet 'by chance', the same providence and divine signs will be applied by the modern believer to the hazards of the web. When, as in the case of 'Urban Retreat', users address their question to an anonymous, spiritual guide whom they'll never see, it may feel like having a relationship with a supernatural being, especially when the exchange is a one-off. Also because, closed off within their reciprocal anonymity, the guide answers the question rather than the person, as Brother Pascal David (quoted above) has pointed out. The same goes for lighting a candle virtually: one has the possibility of sending one's prayer to the NOTHING. From the nothing (written in capital letters) to spiritual nothingness and to God, it isn't far to go.

5 Conclusion: online and offline virtuality

The lexicon attached to the domain of the internet to differentiate it from the world off-line is risky and often imprecise. The recurrent use of quotation marks to qualify offline reality proves how difficult it is to try to separate the two types of reality – the attempt usually creating a hierarchy between them besides. But what is this really about? Is the online reality proposed by the internet unique, the only one of its kind?

Though indubitably the internet affords formerly unsuspected opportunities, that does not mean that everything on it is totally new. Groups of believers have already fostered links they called immaterial, built exclusively on prayer. From that standpoint, believers feel that the links uniting a community barely change when passing from invisible to online monasteries. Virtuality, in a certain sense, is therefore also a characteristic of religion, an observation that is particularly pertinent for links defined as spiritual. The newness of the internet is that it associates virtuality to what was not virtual before, especially in certain rituals, which inevitably makes one wonder what becomes of symbolic efficacy. The arrival of religion on the net, rather than a revolution, implies a displacement and reshuffling of what was dematerialized and spiritual and what was solid and substantial. The internet has not given birth to practices that are absolutely new but it does make realizing virtually what before was strictly material possible. It is then up to the sociologist to study the two spheres by

taking into account the existing continuity and eventual breaking points between online practices and practices that remain within the province of physical reality, not separately but together.

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Biography

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