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When Virtuality Shapes Social Reality

Fake Cults and the *Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*

Lionel Obadia

Abstract

Following the "Internet Revolution", the creation of online religions (religions mainly existing in the virtual world) gave birth to so-called "parody" or fake cults. One of these "religions", the *Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster* has started as a (an atheist) parody mocking (monotheistic) religious institutions, mostly established and spreading in the Informational circuits of the WorldWideWeb. In a few years, it has not only mimicked most of the features of a traditional religion, but the "pirates"-followers of the CFSM also look for the recognition of their cult as "official religion". Moreover, while online religions and especially "fake cults" are most of the times used by scholars as examples of a shift from "reality" to "virtuality" caused by the Internet, the CFSM exemplifies, quite the reverse, a process of social "materialization" of this previously "virtual" cult.

Keywords

Internet, religion, fake cults, Church Flying Spaghetti Monster, epistemology, virtuality

1 Introduction

A new generation of scholars such as Helland, Dawson and Stolow, have analyzed the complex relations between religion and the Internet, under different form: e-religion (Karaflogka, 2006), online-religion (Helland, 2000), cyber-religion (Brasher, 2001), are some of the labels applied to the different aspects religious beliefs currently take on, as molded by the configuration of electronic communication technologies, especially the World Wide Web. Research so far has mostly tackled the way historical religions, as embodied in specific regimes of social and material existence, have been transformed by new information and communication technologies, and how new religious

expressions are thereby fashioned. But a new and groundbreaking area of study is nowadays opening: from the way unexpected forms of beliefs and cults are created, within the vast spectrum of virtual religions (i.e. religions springing from the Internet, with no prior existence), to the sacralization of Internet as a (quasi) religion.

The present study is rooted in this perspective: that of the unexpected, albeit not unforeseeable, influence of the Web in terms of religious innovation – namely, the creation of new religions in the "virtual world" of electronic information streams. For such an analysis, the traditional historiographic, ethnographic and sociographic methods need to be complemented by more adapted techniques, such as the recently devised "netnography" and "webservation" (whether participatory or not, see Varrisco, 2002). This enables to scrutinize the way new social and communication logics are deployed in the virtual sphere.

One of the pioneers, Christopher Helland, elaborated the opposition between *online religions* – religions that have an online presence with a high degree of interaction and transformation – to *religions online* – traditions that have merely relocated to the digital space, making use of information and communication techniques, thereby prolonging and altering religious forms and modes (obedience, loyalty, hierarchy, etc.) that were already constituted (Helland, 2000). However, a third category can be found between these two: digital religions that only exist (at first sight) in the Web's "virtual world". The famous *Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster* is such a digital religion. It will be the grounds on which this study is built, to reflect on the nature of the symmetrical effects between Internet and religions' social and material reality.

2 Internet and religion: what hasn't been said, finally?

Because they raise sharply current themes, and because they are regularly highlighted by new research or theoretical thinking, the interactions between religions and information and communication technologies have given rise to vast and diverse work. Internet has particularly prompted many publications, all signaling, in contrasting perspectives, that we are faced with a "digital revolution", placed at the center of a new mythology - that of ultra-modernity. Traditional ways of life, including religious forms, although previously thought to be more resistant (Balandier, 1985), tend to align with this new paradigm.

But the topic is neither new nor original. It has already been abundantly explored, and often copiously labored. When looking at the way religions' access and appropriation of the Internet, whether the subsequent transformations of sacred institutions, rituals, knowledge, of the ways religious ideas and values are transmitted, of the modes of legitimation of beliefs and the regulation

of values and morality: the analysis generally mainly accounts the *effects* of Internet on religions (historical or more modern). It tackles the *alteration* of traditions by technology, but does not always explore in depth other alternatives - although the field is evolving very quickly and such one-sided perspectives are in competition with more complex models of analysis (see Campbell, 2006).

Moreover, the conclusions often sing the same tune: Internet is a "revolution" for societies, for cultures, and, by extension, for religions. Amongst the most mentioned effects of technological changes the "dematerialization" of religion acts as an operator for distending social bonds, dissolving effective expressions of authority, etc. *Virtuality*, a key concept in electronic media studies, refers to the modes and effects of technological simulations of forms of reality, characterizing in the same stroke their digitalization and their dematerialization into a simulacrum of material reality, as perceived by the natural senses. Generally accepted as such, the concept has however been debated and questioned, and evolved towards a more logical definition: virtuality is conceived as a non-real that potentially carries the qualities of the real, and offers a creative potential for religions. This sense will be preferred here.

Overall, within all topics pertaining to religions developing online, virtuality defined as the social and physical "dematerialization" of religious institutions remains crucial. At first sight, it appears to break down the social fabric on which religious institutions are structured, to transform the access to knowledge (more readily and freely available, but as a "mixture" of symbols, statements, practical recommendations, ...), and to generate a self-serving, and even consumerist attitude among Web users, which is seen as typifying the relationship to cultural and religious objects in post-modern societies (Gauthier and Tuomas, 2013).

But the effects of electronic diffusion and connectivity are much subtler, and also work in the other direction, by extending symbolic functions that are "classically" associated to religion (Helland 2005). Once it is defined in alternative terms, virtuality ceases to equate "dematerialization", and participates in back-and-forth dynamics between material and immaterial, between physical inscriptions and digital figurations of beliefs. These ontological oscillations are keenly observed in the general category of cyber-religions, and even more so in the sub-category of "parody cults". Amongst the most famous "cyber", "fake", or "hyper-real" religions, the *Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster* ("CFSM") significantly illustrates these back-and-forth dynamics between the various planes of existence.

3 Cyber-Religions and Fake Cults

To analyze the way religions are transformed, one must first look at the general media, whether printed (press, literature) or audiovisual (cinema, TV, and finally digital networks) (Stolow, 2010). There is something unique in digital networks. But their impact is only a particular step in the general technical progress, and in the specific evolution of information technologies (Debray 2001). Internet allows all sorts of expressions about religion (praise, criticism, information, analysis or proselytism), but it also offers a space for mockery: religion becomes the target of satire, from the sharp humor of cartoons and hypertext on collective sites and personal blogs, to caricatures (figurative or audiovisual) of existing religions. And, interestingly, new forms of spoof cults are invented, named "fake" or "parody" cults. These "fake cults" are not only false as in erroneous and misleading, they are also fictitious. As "bogus cults", they mimic the form, though not necessarily the nature nor the function, of the traditional religions they seek to mock. These fake cults belong to the larger trend of religious spoofs, that caricature established religions (the "Great" religions as defined by Weber) and alternative movements ("new religious movements", as termed by contemporary sociology: sects, alternative spiritual movements, minority cults).

Some religious entities on the Internet reverse the flow between reality and virtuality. Fake cults are such entities, and it is particularly visible in the case of the CFSM. Internet is replete with these cyber-religions, whose ontological regime / existence is depending on electronic networks, which mostly spring from the English-speaking world. Some of them are already famous, such as the *Church of Moo*, *Digitalism*, the *Church of Subgenious*, the *Church of Virus*, the *Invisible Pink Unicorn*, the *Holy Order of the Lemon*, *Technosophy*, the *Virtual Church of the Blind Chihuahua*, and so on[1]. Borrowing terminology and images from existing traditions, which they openly seek to mock, isn't accidental: it explicitly positions them as "fake" or "parody" cults, obviously making fun of religion and religious beliefs by using established religions' symbols and social attire.

Technology isn't the only source from which fake cults, or pseudo-digital religions, spring. Post-modern culture and globalization have transformed the way social actors relate to reality. And technology is not the sole explanatory factor for this change. Mutations of imagination have also largely contributed to dissolving the patterns of reality, by borrowing references from an increasingly globalized popular culture, whether literary or cinematic. Following in David Chidester's footsteps (Chidester, 2005), Adam Possamai indicated that modernity and globalization have created the most propitious conditions for popular culture, seen as the perfect place to invent

1 There were more than thirty-five listed on the Yahoo directory in 2011 <accessed July 7, 2011>, there are only 6 in 2013. http://dir.yahoo.com/society_and_culture/cultures_and_groups/cyberculture/religions/ <accessed January 15, 2013> the website https://www.religiousworlds.com/~religio9/virtual/religions.html proposed a longer list before closing <accessed January 15, 2013>.

beliefs and cultural practices, to strive, with a new (media-induced) form, but with an identical (cross-over) content, and to expand on a large scale (that of transmission networks, precisely) (Possamai, 2012).

"Hyper-real" religions are inspired by diverse sources, from science-fiction cinema and literature, to sciences, modern music (rock, hip-hop), video games, current affairs, … (Possamai, 2012). As a consequence, the emergence of "virtual" religions can be read not as *solely* dematerializing religiousness, but as creatively reinventing sacredness, with the help of (and not against) technological globalization.

Parodies of religions are concomitant with the recent trend of rapidly developing religious affiliations and claims, which have been described as "ludicrous", and generally stemming from popular literary and cinematic culture. Possamai insists on the major influence popular cinema and literature have had on the emergence of these fake cults. Internet has widened the creative potential of these "bizarre" cults, with references to what was initially pertaining to traditionally sacred repertoires, or, quite the reverse, exempt of any kind of sacrality.

A number of these have already emerged and been debated in a world of images and unleashed imagination as portrayed by Guy Debord or Jean Baudrillard. Despite their biting criticism of such movements, Debord and Baudrillard could certainly not have imagined the extent to which the power of imagination could fuse religion with culture in the productions of the industry of popular entertainment. For example, thousands of Britons and Americans nowadays adhere (or claim to) to two new religious labels that sprung from *Star Wars* and *The Matrix*: *jedism* and *matrixism* are already key representatives of such subversive, unconventional movements.

According to a 2011 British survey, 176'000 people claimed to belong to the "jedi religion", which placed it first in the ranks of alternative religions. The same survey showed that 6'300 people followed a "heavy metal religion" - which had been jokingly invented the previous year by rock music magazines. In a same vein, the religion of *kopimism* was developed by hackers in Sweden in the 2010's, based on the sacredness of peer-to-peer (information) exchange[2]. It was hailed as the first fake cult inspired by the Internet, and has been officially recognized by the Swedish government. Through its openly missionary spirit, it has now reached Great-Britain and Australia.

2 http://io9.com/one-of-the-first-religions-inspired-by-the-internet-476516354 <accessed 10 february 2013>

4 The *Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*

The *Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster* ("CFSM") is one of the most famous, original and therefore logically frequently-mentioned parody religions. It was created in the US as a scientific hoax, and subsequently evolved into a pseudo-cult. What makes it most interesting is that it has not only survived, but also developed to the point of offering an empirical and conceptual model for this particular genre of fake cults.

Moreover, while the CFSM started as a solely virtual phenomenon ("virtual" here meaning and pointing at the reductionist view of Internet as a place to dematerialize reality), it rapidly expanded to the physical level, in a number of contexts. Firstly, its forms and expressions (objects and symbols) materialized in daily life; and then, allegiances started to be manifested in the social space.

The CFSM owes its existence to a non-religious scientist who sought to confront Intelligent Design (ID), or "creationism", being taught in high school. This religious theory dresses as science by offering "indisputable proofs" of divine work underwriting the world and humanity, and directly competes with the Darwinian worldview, which represents rationality and settles scientific authority. What motivated the scientist wasn't the theory in itself, but the aggressive activism of its defenders campaigning for its inclusion in school programs.

The CFSM started in 2005, when physicist Bobby Henderson wrote a letter to Kansas' education board requesting his facetious supernatural theory to be taught alongside *Intelligent Design*, a north-American theology predicating supernatural intervention in the world's order[3]. The debate has since expanded beyond the limits of school programs, and beyond borders, as creationism has, to a certain extent, reached Europe, (Stavo, 2012) although it struggles to really settle (Arnould, 2007).

The CFSM's cosmology was imagined as a response to the scientific "absurdity" of Intelligent Design, which, while deeply religious, parades as science to counter scientism. The argument was first limited to North-America, where scientific groups, including renowned figures such as Richard Dawkins (who penned the much-debated *God Delusion)*, defend what can be seen as a new, activist atheism (Dawkins 2006). In this ideological context, the CFSM participates in an active and growing combative atheism promoted by Richard Hawkins and a galaxy of openly anti-religious groups, joining these other in common posture and actions.

The response to the counter-scientist, creationist campaign immediately took the shape of a spoof: on a formal level, the CFSM reversed a religious template. Initially, the underlining idea was

3 Information taken from the website of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster http://www.venganza.org.

not so much to mock an official religion, but to imitate the ways with which Christian partisans refer to secularism and science to block the growth of darwinism and non-religious groups within North-American society. This was at first only communicated on a website.

5 Mirroring religion backwards

The spoof operates on two levels: it makes fun of a pseudo-scientific theory serving religion *and*, as a consequence, mocks religion. In that way, the CFSM takes on the appearance of an established religion, albeit one deformed by sarcasm.

The reversed sham pushes far enough to act as a simulacrum of Christianity. A two-eyed "monster" made of meatballs and noodles performs as godhead, with supernatural powers. It is represented floating in the air, overlooking its creation, humanity, on which it is all powerful: it can elicit faith, or destroy it. The revelation was received by a certain "Captain Mosey", chief pirate, who was the first prophet of the Church.

The CFSM then grew towards institutionalization, through a series of faith articles and normative rules which prove the monster's existence, and eight commandments, that are almost indistinguishable from the Old Testament's prescriptions. A revelation creed is uttered by those who have been "touched" by the monster's "noodly appendage". CFSM members also celebrate religious festivals, simply named "holidays", which take place around Christmas time, and which call upon no other obligation than celebrating. In 2006, Bobby Henderson even wrote a "Gospel" that sets out dogmas, cosmology and indoctrination modes. This "book of faith" for his "empirically-proven religion", as he writes in the piece's codicil, was offered as free download on the Internet for a few years.

The CFSM thereby gained a pseudo-cosmology. The monster's creator, Henderson, had scribbled on a loose sheet (which can still be viewed on the Church's website) what was to become the cosmographic figuration, by setting up key elements in a narrative and figurative form: "In the beginning, He [the monster] created a Mountain, Trees, and a Midget" - recalling the World, the Animal Kingdom and Man, as formulated in the Bible's genesis.

This brief foundation tale doubles as cosmology, based on the idea that the world's intrinsic order and its ontology depend on an existing link between global warming and the number of pirates living on the planet. According to Henderson, the issue of global warming is due to the pirates' demographic decline. Using clever graphs and quantitative data, his colleagues and himself are "convinced" (or so they try to seem) that the number of pirates on Earth decreases in correlation to signs of global warming.

The pirate is a recurring figure in the Church's iconography and symbolic repertoire. For this reason, admirers of the CFSM are known to dress as pirates. The CFSM's specificity is that it offers a humorist but rationalist response to theories highjacking causal, scientific logics. This non-sense rationalization is at the heart of the CFSM's quasi-cosmography. By devising a persuasive scientific varnish, it mocks Intelligent Design's gross causal formulations based on pseudo-scientific correlations.

The afterlife is fashioned in an even more ludicrous manner. Heaven exists. It is a place where men (in the gendered use of the term) eternally live in a strip joint, to satisfy their visual sensuality and their natural tendency to sin. And they enjoy the benefits of a permanently-erupting beer volcano. Women also have their paradise, though adapted to their own genre and preferences: there, strippers are male.

This preposterous cosmology is augmented by a range of distinctive symbols, insuring coherence and harmony with the monster figure. This series of symbols pans from pirate costumes to more stylized objects representing the monster. A fishbone serves as banner and is used on flyers or as a necklace. CFSM adherents are called “pastafarians”, referring to the main ingredients composing the monster's body, with a homophonic allusion to *rastafarians*, those who abide by rastafarianism, the Afro-Jamaican cult. On this basis, CFSM members have called their religion “pastafarianism”, thereby emphasizing the homophonic proximity to existing faiths.

Pastafarians are supposed to observe something that resembles liturgy: their rituals are made of prayers and supplications closely imitating Christian ritual ways. The pastafarian creed stipulates commandments to worship the monster and to spread its message, and declarations of faith (“May His noodly appendages touch you”). An expressive “Ramen!” - a combination term between the Judeo-Christian “Amen” and the eponymous Japanese noodle soup – concludes prayers.

The content of the CFSM website is spontaneously and collaboratively generated by members and supporters of the organization. They participate in nurturing the spaghetti monster's legend, by expanding its application to various fields and constituting “evidences” of what can be called *hierophanies*, physical manifestations of sacredness in the world, a key concept on which Mircea Eliade had built his phenomenology of religions (Eliade 1987).

On its own website and on many others passing on pastafarian “propaganda”, the monster figure is developed in various shapes: cameos in fake amateur films, photographic montages, press clippings showing it in different cities at different time periods. The mimetic irony is pushed to the point where, as in institutionalized religions, religious symbols break free from the orthodox, official readings and offer creative interpretations based on popular religiousness, calling upon optical illusions. On top of it being voluntarily staged, the monster is even represented as appearing

on flatirons or toasts. These are the most recent instances of such unexpected appearances, associated with a religious semiotic repertoire.

The CFSM's evolution touches upon several questions: modern tensions due to relativism and the symmetrical nature of knowledge, ideological conflicts in (partially or deeply) secularized societies' schooling systems, the ever-present opposition between science and religion and, obviously, the proliferation of fake religions and anti-religious hoaxes facilitated by electronic connectivity, paralleling and reacting to missionary uses of the Worldwide Web. All these issues, and more, are relevant to the CFSM. But the present study concentrates on another perspective: the ability of a web-based pseudo-cult to move beyond its virtuality and permeate the “real world”, that of effective social dynamics.

6 The unexpected materialization of a spoof cult: from virtual to real, and back

What makes the CFSM an interesting case within the field of cyber-religious studies, is that it surpasses the oft-mentioned theory of dematerialization: it offers the possibility to theorize religion's social *re-materialization*, as the second step of a somewhat reversible process. Less than a decade after its founding, it has built on its developments on the electronic network and on its website, and is spreading into the “real world”, into the domain of ordinary materiality and concrete social relationships, through unexpected forms of physical objects and collective manifestations in public areas.

In the past few years, online networks – the ultimate site for the dematerialization of historical religions – have been replete with visual instances (photographs, videos) by disciples, staging their allegiance to the CFSM in the streets, and in private and public places (university campuses, for example). These numerous, isolated, initiatives testify to the parodic cult's supporters' boundless creativity, supporting the cause by playing with symbol transposition in the “real world”.

Clumsy sculptures of the monster, created from unlikely material such as recycled fabric, metal or plastic, toilet paper, and graphic art such as posters, stickers, or drawings, are exhibited at street corners. The number of these local apparitions has been growing over the past ten years, and they have turned from disorganized interventions to planned group events. In the late 2000s, early 2010s, CFSM disciples have also manifested their denominational allegiance and ideological support through “rallies”, which are filmed and quickly made available online on the CFSM website or on video and image broadcasting networks.

“Pirates” have joined celebration marches in various cities, brandishing the CFMS emblems and the monster figure, along with boards stating their favorite slogan (“He boiled for your sins” -

which overtly mocks the Christian statement “He dies for our sins”). For example, during the 2010 solstice parade in Fremont (CA, USA), at the initiative of an overtly atheist organization, costumed adepts gathered on a float featuring the monster figure.

The trajectory from virtual to material is also that moving from hypertextuality to textuality, in the specific case of the CFSM as a backwards mimicry of religion. The CFSM's gospel was originally written and formatted for the web, as an e-book. It has now been printed in hardcover - and the CFSM claims it has been translated into several thousand languages. Moreover, with a very strong focus on propagating its set of beliefs, the CFSM has recently chosen to resort to more traditional ways of transmitting messages than the usual online tactics, with propaganda material such as flyers and posters. And the persuasion rhetoric and tactics applied by the CFMS are comparatively close to the conversion arguments and strategies used by “real” religions.

Some of these techniques are old and proven. The explicit missionary intention (“Convert the masses with propaganda flyers”), translates into an “official” minister diploma acquired by paying twenty US dollars. Pirate-costumed members spread propaganda, by peddling in the streets and on American university campuses, and creating visibility for the CFSM symbols in public spaces by distributing stickers, leaflets and brochures.

Catchy slogans, such as “It's alive !”, “His Noodly appendage wants you”, “Do you believe?”, or “Stop global warming, become a pirate”, associated with CFSM symbols, form the aesthetic basis for this propaganda material. Sometimes, more explicit messages emerge, such as “Emancipate yourself from mental slavery”. And some textual content even overtly expresses hostility to the CFSM's raison d'être: “Intelligent design with balls” both plays on the monster's ingredients, and on a “virile” assertion directly aimed at belittling proponents of creationism.

Other more modern techniques directly abide by the CFSM's “virtual” quality: visual elements are developed and spread electronically, through viral campaigns, with acronyms and banners on other sites, and goodies such as desktop background images. A special type of dynamics is therefore observed here: not only does dematerialization not compete with materially embedded religiousness, it also galvanizes creativity for the latter. This process of social and physical materialization, or rather, the CFSM's shift from virtual to “real”, is deepened by administrative claims seeking to establish the CFSM in public area, in countries where it has already acquired statistical visibility (starting with the US).

Since 2007, following Henderson's lead, several US citizens rallied to the CFSM cause have successfully quelled, in some schools, the program amendments enabling creationism to be taught as “science”. Beyond the ideological motivation to which the Church's first members responded, a yearn for official, governmental recognition of CFSM's distinctive signs is now emerging. The CFSM has transitioned from being a reactive movement (against creationism), to aggressive

activism. This evolution channels the attention away from the parodic aspect of the organization, towards its role as a proactive player in the fight between religious forces (in its fundamentalist aspects) and secularism (in its liberal demands).

A statue of the monster was set up in a public area in 2008 in Crossville (TN, USA), but was quickly removed after it sparked heated arguments. Other isolated initiatives have also sought recognition on an institutional level. In 2011, Austrian citizen Niko Alm requested and received the right to sport a colander on his head on the passport picture he used on his driver's license. This "hat" is one of the pastafarians' signs of allegiance, along with the pirate costume. Not satisfied with this relative victory, Alm went further by applying for official recognition of the CFSM as religion by the Austrian government. Another case was recorded in August 2013, when young Czech citizen Lukas Novy received international media coverage when he tried to renew his lost ID card. Like Alm, he presented a passport picture taken with a colander on his head. The administrative issue was purely legal: Czech law states that official pictures cannot feature any type of head accessory. Yet, this did not disqualify the statutory possibility of official recognition of the CFSM as "religion", and Novy, like Alm, has launched such a process. Both cases are following course... In Poland, a country deeply attached to its Catholic heritage, similar cases have recently been recorded and the possibility to include the CFSM on the list of official "religions" is harshly discussed by the national administrations.

7 Conclusion

On the basis of electronic and social empiricism, and in the case of the CFSM, these elements seem to confirm that new information and communication technologies, especially the Web, rework the borders between virtual and real. They also prove that this process does not necessarily lead to a "dematerialization" of religion in the digital world. The CFSM started as a spoof simulating religion, but has come to represent and reflect a collective modality of the ideological and cultural war being fought between secularism and religion, in the US as well as in other corners of the world. Although far from being the sole illustration of a pseudo-religion being created from cybernetic scratch, it is most interesting as an object of study because of the complex dynamics it reveals. The CFSM simulates religion (especially Christianity), by mimicking and caricaturing the features most vulnerable to positivist (secularist) rationality, to highlight the dissimulative effects of religious proselytism parading as science, i.e. creationism.

By travestying the ideology of Intelligent Design's educational assault on secularist positivism, the CFSM extends its criticism to the wider-encompassing category of religion. What

started as a partial conflict (centered on genesis, which divides the two camps) has grown to reach the larger scale of a dispute between secularist and religious contenders. The ironic game of pseudo-religious mimesis is most appropriate, especially because it reacts to the mimetic appropriation of scientific demonstration modes by fundamentalist religious groups – a tendency that is becoming more widespread.

The CFSM is one of the numerous Web-born fake cults, but it has become more than just a "virtual religion". Created in the US, with international reach, notably in Europe, its expansion illustrates the informative effects of the worldwide web. This observation is particularly stark when one takes into account the original goal of such fake cults: the "virtual" aspect becomes even more central inasmuch that it wasn't meant to be more than a local, Internet-based, spoof.

But this initially virtual religion has contagiously spread, becoming an institution. It has spurred empirical manifestations: times and places of sociability, conversion modes and allegiance claims, publications, and an internationally structured organization – all of which can be seen as an analogous morphology of a globalized cult. Studied with the tools of (French) ethnography and (international) netnography, the CFSM shows how a virtual parody religion, fomented by scientists in the context of the North-American science vs. religion debate, has grown into a worldwide pseudo-cult. But this is not all, given the fact that The CFSM's specificity illustrates more than the evolution of a virtual cult: it reflects the way with which, sometimes, virtuality unexpectedly translates to social reality and transforms its regime of existence. It exemplifies the creation of material anchors through the Web – a space in which religions that already exist materially are urged to invest to survive.

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Biography

LIONEL OBADIA, Ph-D, is professor in anthropology at the University of Lyon 2, France, fellow of the Institute of Advanced Studies of Strasbourg, France. He is specialized in religious studies, anthropology and sociology of religion. After a Ph-D on Buddhism in France and in the West, he has studied Buddhism, shamanism and witchcraft in Asia, mainly Nepal, India, Sri Lanka. He has recently conducted research on Jewish Messianic movement in Europe, US and Israel, and football (soccer) in a religious perspective in France. He has also examined epistemological and methodological issues in religious studies. He is the author of ten books (*Marchandisation de Dieu*, 2013, *Anthropologie des religions*, 2007, translated in Greek and Portuguese, reedited 2012, Religion, 2004, translated in Korean and Turkish, *Sorcellerie*, 2004, *Le bouddhisme en Occident*, 2007, translated in Italian, and others in English like *The Economics of Religion* with Donald Wood, Emerald, 2011) and more than one hundred chapters and articles in French, English, Spanish, Chinese and German.

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