Kerstin Radde-Antweiler (Ed.)
Being Virtually Real?

Virtual Worlds from a Cultural Studies' Perspective.

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Ritualdynamik

"VIRTUAL RELIGION"

AN APPROACH TO A RELIGIOUS AND RITUAL TOPOGRAPHY
OF SECOND LIFE.[1]

KERSTIN RADDE-ANTWEILER

Introduction

In the academic field of "Cultural Studies", as in other cultural and social disciplines, the relevance of the Internet as a new media is constantly increasing. As Christine Hine stated the Internet can be seen as "*a cultural context of its own right" (*Hine 2006: 109), that has become an important part of our cultural and scientific assets, heritage and memory. But at the same time the Internet and all its possibilities is forming, transforming and inventing these cultural structures itself. New areas of scholarly research can be found on websites, weblogs, in chat rooms, newsgroups and in virtual 3D Environments, where religious and spiritual topics are presented and continuously negotiated. Therefore, the challenges of this media provide the scholar with materials in a still mainly unexplored field of research, demanding new scientific methods and methodologies in order to analyse the similarly new realm of religious beliefs and utterances in this virtual space.

Nevertheless Virtual Worlds imply more than the "World Wide Web" given the ability of the users to perform religion and rituals in an Environment free of real-life body conditions. Even if the user could light candles or visit different temples in the World Wide Web Virtual Worlds offer him a three-dimensional area of the Internet, in which each individual is represented by an avatar and can interact with others. As a result the user can perform actions and therefore also religion and rituals with his "embodied body".

Virtual Worlds however are not as new a phenomena as one would assume: the first *MUDS* which can be seen as the ancestors of modern 3D Environments were created in the 1970s and drew a line from *MUD1* in 1978, *Habitat* 1988, the first graphical Online-Roleplaying-Game *Neverwinter Nights* in 1991, *Meridian 59* in 1996 to the still popular

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[1] Sincere thanks are given to Simone Heidbrink and Jan Wessel for their helping hand in proof-reading:)

games like *Ultima Online* in the same year, *Everquest* two years later, to *World of Warcraft* in 2004, which is until now the most played MMORPG!

In contrast to these MMORPGs 3D Environments like *Active Worlds*[2] and *There*[3] which have been in use since 1995 and 1998 respectively or the most prominent and famous example Second Life[4] which became available to the public 2003 are defined as Online-Communities or as "LifeSims"[5] because they differ from MMORPGs in some important points like the missing goal or end: "The center of such Environments represent not the chasing of Highscore but the care of the figure – the avatar -, the interaction with other residents and the joint events."[6]

Due to the media hype over the last few months the most prominent example of such LifeSims today is represented by the privately-owned, subscription-based 3D application *Second Life*. As a result of the media coverage the number of registrations reached the ten million-mark in June 2007. However one has to be careful when judging these figures because the number of involved residents is much lower due to the "one-time-registration". It is assumed that 200.000 to 600.000 residents are "living" an active "Second Life". There are usually approx. ten to thirty thousands residents online at the same time .

In contrast to all the other existing Virtual Worlds *Second Life* has its own economic system and its own currency, the "Linden Dollars", which can be changed into U.S. Dollars by using a stock market system. Their monetary circulation corresponds to financial transactions in real life, as Linden Lab's revenues clearly show (Castronova 2005). Previous analysis made it clear, that *Second Life* is not just a virtual playground. Rather it can be deemed as an enhancement of real-life possibilities on an economical, a social as well as a religious level. The qualitative survey of Jakobsson (Jakobsson 2006) for example disproves Turkles thesis that Virtual Worlds are merely a simulation of real-life social action (Turkle 1995).

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[2] See http://www.activeworlds.com/.

[3] See http://www.there.com/.

[4] See http://secondlife.com/. According to Linden Lab in September 2007, *Second Life* consisted of over nine million residents from over 80 countries If over the last few years the world was primarily inhabited by US-residents, the number of European users have increased substantially in the recent months. The Virtual World *Teen Second Life* was build for people aged between 13 and 18 in the middle of this year. See http://teen.secondlife.com/.

[5] Schmitz 2007.

[6] Schmitz 2007, 51: „Im Zentrum steht nicht die Jagd nach dem Highscore, sondern die Pflege der Spielfigur, die Interaktion mit anderen und die dabei gesammelten Erlebnisse."

The role of religion in Second Life

Apart from financial aspects and influences cultural activities in *Second Life* play an important role: the users are both socially and religiously very active and consequently transfer real-life activities and therefore also religious symbols and performances into the virtual space. Individual residents but also groups, that have existed offline thus build different religious settings from various traditions. The following paper looks to give a first descriptive overview on religious settings[7] in this Virtual World and discuss some possible objects of investigations for religious studies in a second step.

In contrast to former typologies of so called "religion" the following "guided visual tour or slideshow" of religious settings within Second Life stresses the invariance and the fluid character of religious groups and/or ascription to one fixed tradition. Thus the term 'cluster' or agglomeration looks to signify the inability to determine fixed borders in this research area. Religious constellations have to be looked at in a different light than previously due to their different aspects ranging from the theologies of individual authors or group-specific outlines of common traditions to the beliefs and practices of religious individuals. These constellations must also be queried on their interdependencies and interactions as well as on their displacements and adaptations. In contrast to interior standardization of fixed systems, as is seen for example in theologies, a religious cluster can be thereby described as a collection of diverse religious beliefs from many different individuals.

One has also to stress that this list is of course not exhaustive – on the the contrary, one can find various other settings whereby the stated settings below can be destroyed just in the time it takes to read this article.

Jewish Cluster

In the so called Jewish context one can find various synagogues in the different regions as well as groups which discuss and also perform Jewish religion and rituals on different levels. An example of a mere reproduction or representation of an ancient building illustrates the

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[7] Besides the explicit religious places one can find a lot of settings and also businesses dealing with rituals in general like cemeteries, memorials - like the one for the victims of the Virginia Tech University shooting built only a few hours after the tragedy - or the wide range of wedding possibilities. For Wedding Rituals in Second Life see Radde-Antweiler forthc.

Jerusalem Temple[8] in the region „Holy City". The owner - a Dutch named Rabbi Writer - has tried to „rebuild" the Second Temple just as it had been until 70 years before Christ. According to him the Region "Holy City" represents an initiative of an "Open Jewish Congregation Klal Israel of Delft, the Netherlands". In the main entrance the visitor receives general information – in English and Durch - about the area:

> "Welcome to our Holy City.
> Outside you see the walls of a full-scale reconstruction of the Second Temple that stood in Jerusalem till the year 70. To fully experience the size of the building move around in mouse-mode: it will be yóu walking through the gates...
> In the south-east of this estate you may enter a full-scale replica of our old synagogue in Delft.
> This estate is filled with information and Jewish music, so walk around and enjoy yourself."[9]

Figure 1: Second Life-Replication of the Temple of Jerusalem.

Figure 2: Portrait of the builder of the Second Life Temple of Jerusalem: Rabbi Writer.
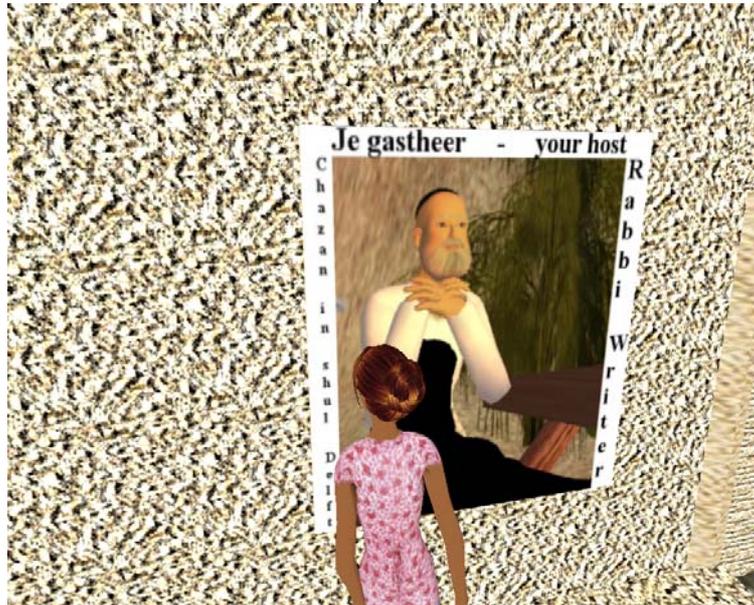
Like in well-known offline tourist places also in the Virtual World the visitor is required to dress properly: "We would really appreciate it if you would take a copy of the black skullcap on top of this sign, and attach it to your skull."[10] A sign with the inscription "Daughter of Yisrael modest dress till below the knees"on a prominent place in the entrance hall also stresses this point.

Variant buildings ranging from the „Cave of the Patriarchs", the tomb of Rachel to „Solomon's Temple" and even the holy Tabernacle can be found.

Figure 3: Second Life-Temple of Jerusalem – Replication of the First Temple of Salomon I. General View.

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[10] Notecard "RW-welkom" received on 09/15/2007.

Figure 4: Second Life-Temple of Jerusalem – Replication of the First Temple of Salomon II. Close-up View.

Figure 5: Second Life-Temple of Jerusalem – Replication of the First Temple of Salomon III: „Inner Sanctum".
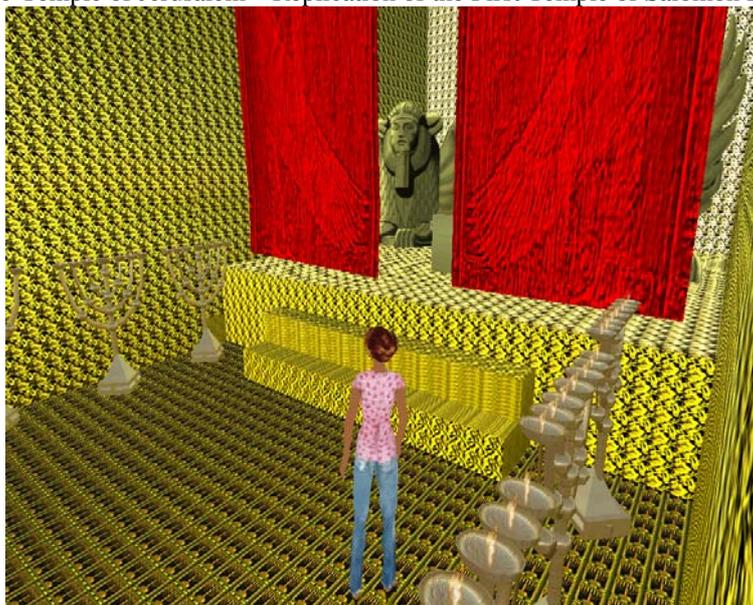
For each building the visitor can obtain information about the history of the building. Also bible quotes can be found and used for prayer:

]
„Twelve tribes once made up the nation Israel.
Nowadays only two are left:
Levi and Judah (hence the name "Jews").
On this map you can see how the Promised Land was split in parcels for every tribe.
Twelve gates the Temple has: one for every tribe.
In front of every gate you will find the logo of the tribe.

> When you click on the logo, you receive a notecard containing the blessing Jacob gave that son and that tribe on his deathbed. Also, it contains the blessing Moses gave that tribe shortly before the people entered the Promised Land."[11]

With audio-streams available, music and songs like "Jerusalem of gold" sung by Ofra Haza" can be heard while watching the different buildings. Furthermore photographs of offline settings are integrates, like a photo taken at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. The huge area with its several buildings and exhibitions is reminiscent of the offline "Museumsinsel" in Berlin the difference being that given the online possibilities even lost cultural settings – or better interpretations of it - can be presented and be visited virtually.

Another example of the Jewish Cluster represents the Second Life synagogue **„Temple Beit Israel"**[12]in the Region Nessus. In contrast to the Temple of Jerusalem in Holy City the synagogue is used not only to represent jewish religion but also to serve as a place for worship. One can find a lot of group events which take place each week . Additionally music groups or art exhibition are presented. Jewish messes or meetings to discuss different religious topics can be observed. Several benches and also a separate "working" room for discussion which takes place weekly were build for this purpose. For individual meditation there is a place where the avatar can be animated to sit in a meditation pose outside the building. By use of the Google Calendar the user can – independent of Second Life – inform himself about the different events taking place.

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[11] Notecard received on 09/15/2007.
[12] For the in-world address see Nessus 23, 142, 103.

Figure 6: Second Life synagogue- Temple Beit Israel.

Figure 7: Second Life synagogue- Temple Beit Israel.

Figure 8: Second Life synagogue- Temple Beit Israel. Meditation-Place outside.

Figure 9: Google-Calendar of the Second Life synagogue- Temple Beit Israel.

Christian Cluster

Figure 10: Second Life Ruach Ministries. Outside

Figure 11: Second Life Ruach Ministries. Prayer Possibilities.
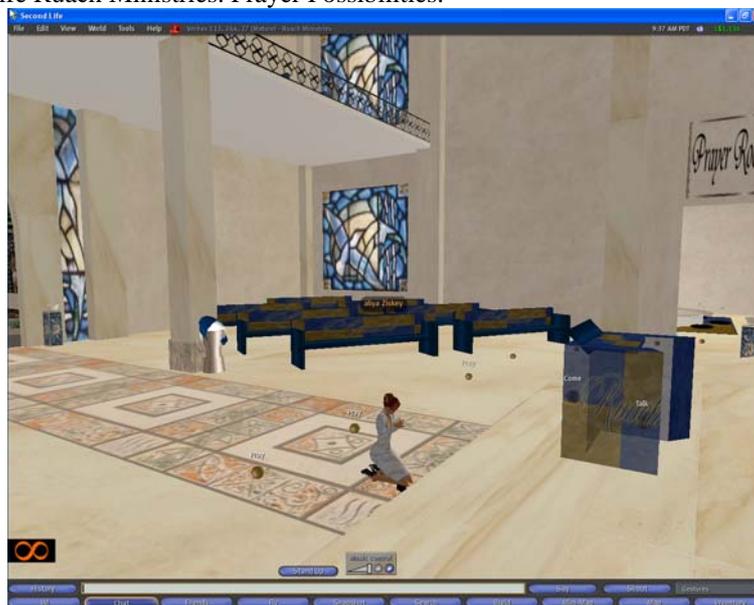
An example of a "typical" Christian church can be seen in the **Ruach Ministry** which offers church services, prayer and meditation groups in *Second Life*. The Ruach Ministry was founded in 2006 by the pastors Marlon and Eco Brocco and is located in the region Veritas.[13] The group behind Ruach Ministry exists also in real life: "Ruach Ministries is an extension of Fountain of Jesus Christ Fellowship Church, a Real Life Ministry Pastoed by J. & F. Burton

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[13] For the in-world address see Veritas 112,224,27.

of Houston, TX."[14] According to its profile which the visitor can receive in the entrance area via notecard the group wants to be understood want to be understood as an extension of real life faith and they believe in the impeccability of the Holy Bible, the Holy Trinity, the virgin birth, salvation by Jesus Christ, baptism and the parousia:

"The Ruach Minisitries' Statement of Faith

"STATEMENT OF FAITH
Ruach Ministries Believes....

The Infallibility of Scripture

That The Word of God, The Bible, The Holy Scriptures are infallible and the sole source of spiritual direction for his children. Anything preached or written by man must align with the Holy Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:16)

The Triune God

That there is one God eternally existant [sic!] in three entities as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. The scripture says that there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. (1 John 5:7) All three, as distinct and co-eternal, are one Divine essence.

The Virgin Birth

That Jesus Christ was born of a virgin and came to save mankind from their sins. (Matthew 1:18-21)

Salvation

That mankind is sinful and in need of a savior. Man cannot save himself and needs Jesus to save him from sin. Jesus Christ died on the corss [sic!] as the ultimate sacrifice for our sins, was buried, rose on the third day and now sits eternally on the throne of heaven as priest and king. Salvation from sin requires repentance and accpetance [sic!] of Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior. (John 3:16; 1 Corinthians 15:4-5)

Water Baptism

That water baptism is the obedient expression of the salvation experience. While baptism is not required for salvation, it serves as an outward expression of an inward experience. (Acts 2:38)

The Second Coming

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[14] http://ruachministriessl.org/aboutus.aspx.

That Jesus Christ will return like a theif [sic!] in the night to rapture the Church. in the end times. (1 Thessalonians 5:2)"“[15]

Alongside the church services there is also the possibility to pray by oneself, featuring complete prayer instructions and prescripts and the corresponding animation available to the avatar. An explicit information about the faith presented is given by notecard. Additionally several rules or a „Code of Conduct" as it is called in the emic perspective are also given to the resident by entering the church.

"Ruach Ministries' Code of Conduct

Ruach Ministries is a Second Life extension of a Real Life Church. Our Sunday services are designed to cultivate an environment of free worship and receiving of the Word of God. To that end, we as Pastors of Ruach Ministries desire that those in attendance respect and abide by the following codes of conduct:
1. Please turn off all bling and scripted attachments to reduce lag.
2. If during the service, you experience technical difficulties (i.e. audio cutting out or lost) Please advise Pastors Marlon or Eco in private IM so as not to distract those attendees who may not be experiencing such difficulties.
3. If during the service, you have questions or concerns, about the church, the message, or general questions, please present them to Pastors Marlon or Eco in private IM or after the conclusion of the service. We are always available after service to answer questions or address concerns.
4. Ruach Ministries does not tolerate deliberate disruptions. Anyone instigating an argument with the Pastors or attendees, using profanity, deliberately insluting [sic!] the integrity of the Church, the Pastors, and most importantly Christ and His Word will be removed from the region at the discretion of the Pastor depending on the severity of the disrption [sic!] .
5. There is a time and place for everything. If any attendee disagrees with any of Ruach's doctrine or anything referenced in our Sermons, it is our expectation that your thoughts and opinions be expressed in the proper venue, either in IM or outside of Sunday service. Public service is not the time or place to debate.
Our code of conduct is not limited to the above. We ask that attendees of Ruach Ministries respect the requests of our Pastors at any given time. No one who attends or has attended Ruach Ministries shall make any public statement written or vocal representing Ruach Ministries without the expressed written permission of Pastor Marlon or Eco Brocco.
God Bless You all!
In Christ, Marlon Brocco, Pastor
Ruach Ministries"[16]

The Ruach Church is thereby also presented in the World Wide Web on their website http://ruachministriessl.org and a weblog on http://www.ruachministries.blogspot.com on

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[15] Notecard received on 09/15/2007.
[16] Notecard received on 09/15/2007.

which the interested user can obtain more information about the online and offline congregations as well as weekly messages and bible study tools.

Another example of a Christian church in Second Life is represented by the **Church of the Living God** in the region "Wings of Hope". It is owned by the group "Wings of Hope Neighbourhood." As in the Ruach Church presented above one can find a traditional church setting with the opportunity to pray, including specific prayer instruction etc. Next to the sanctuary which contains several benches and an altar area the office of the responsible reverend is situated. Specific consultation-hours are offered alongside with the normal church services where personal questions and problems can be discussed. The group which contained over 40 members is connected via a website http://www.wingsofhopemag.com where you find further information about a corresponding Christian magazine whose intention is "bringing WOH Mag to the real world. An SL magazine in an RL world, an RL magazine in an SL world."17

Figure 12: Baptist Church. Sanctuary.

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17 See http://www.wingsofhopemag.com/staff.html.
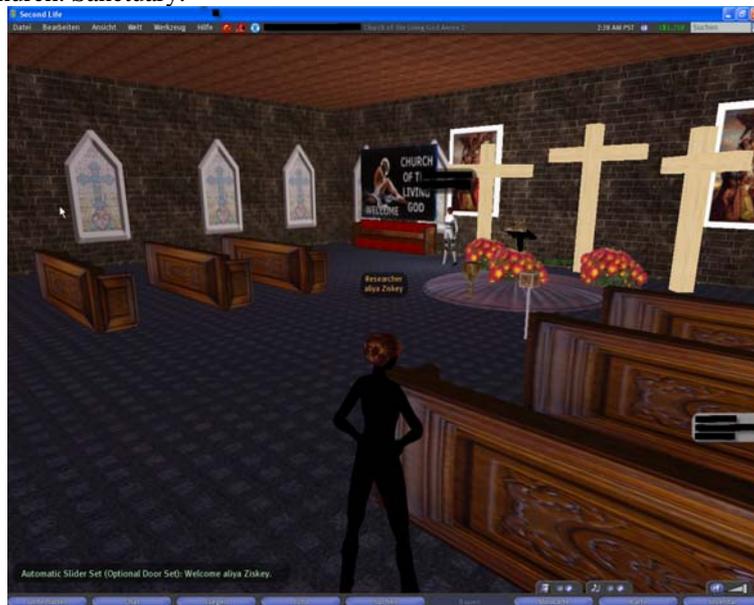
Figure 13:Baptist Church. Info-Board.

Figure 14: Baptist Church. Office.

Using the search facility within Second Life one can not only find church buildings but also various groups or individual residents who present Christian beliefs and / or offer discussion groups on their notecards. An example of such a group is **SecondLifer for Christ** with approx. 15 members for everyone free to join. According to their self-presentation on their Second Life profile they "believe in the Life, the death the burial and the Resurection [sic!] of Jesus Christ [...].in agreement that Jesus Christ is the son of God. he is risen [...] believe the Gosple of Jesus Christ."[18]

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[18] Notecard received on 09/15/2007.

Figure 15: Second Life Group "SecondLifer for Christ". Notecard.
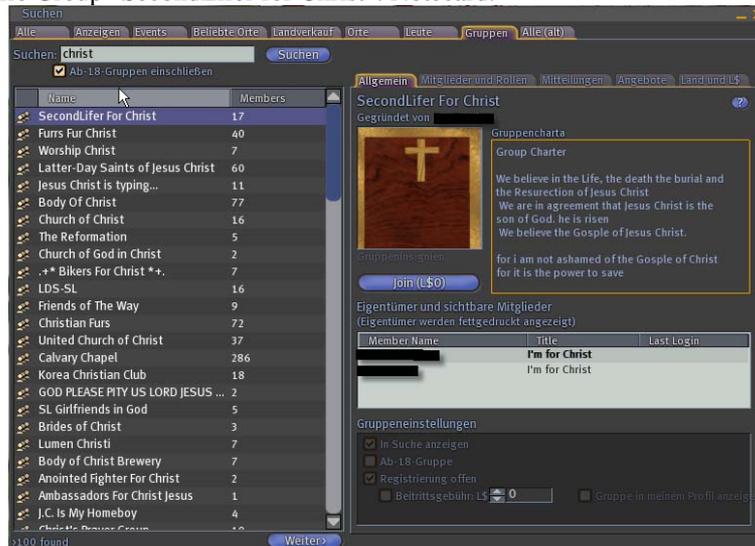
Another example is represented by the Mormon group **LatterDay Saints of Jesus Christ** with over 50 members. Their main goal is to "(l)ove and respect God and our fellow beings Live by the Golden Rule Keep thoughts, words, and actions clean and in harmony with the restored gospel of Jesus Christ."[19] This group also functions as an extension of a real life religious group. It is also represented on two websites http://www.mormon.org and http://www.lds.org which provide further information. Interestingly enough one can not find any remarks concerning the Second Life group on either website.

Figure 16: Group "LatterDay Saints of Jesus Christ." Notecard.

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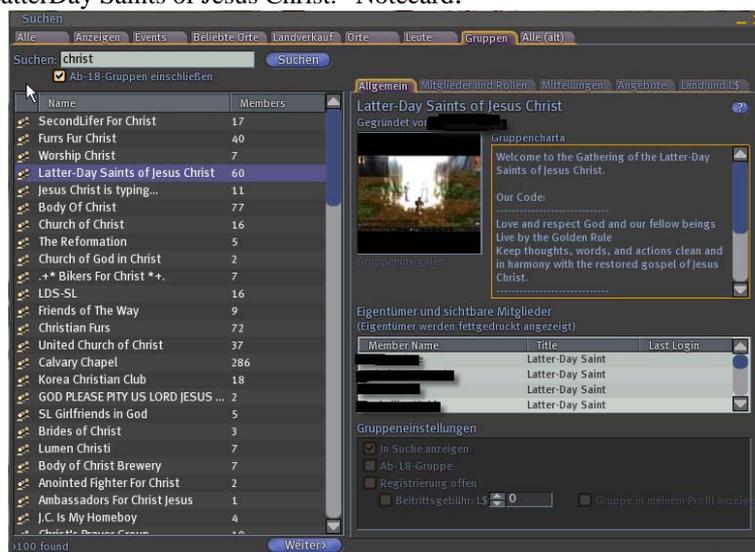
[19] Notecard received on 09/15/2007.

An example for a specific national Christian group is the **Korea Christian Club** which organizes "meeting of Korean believes [sic!] in Jesus Christ."[20] They consist of approx. 40 members.

Figure 17: Second Life Group "Korea Christian Club." Notecard.
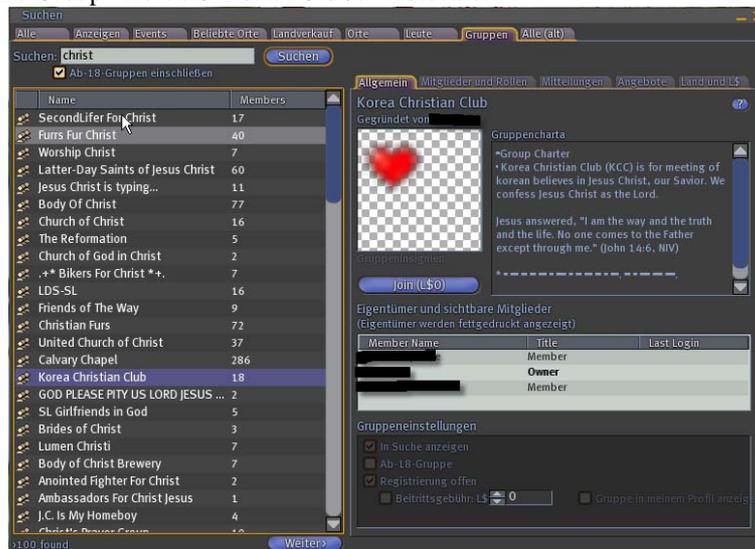
Muslim Cluster

The Cordoba inspired **Chebi Mosque** is located in the region Chebi.[21] The administration and building is supported by the Chebi Mosque Supporting Group. The owner of this group is a real and Second Life artist and has build several religious buildings within Second Life ranging from the Al Andalus Alhambra[22] to the Chapel for the Holy mother of God Maria[23].

Figure 18: Chebi Mosque. Sanctuary.
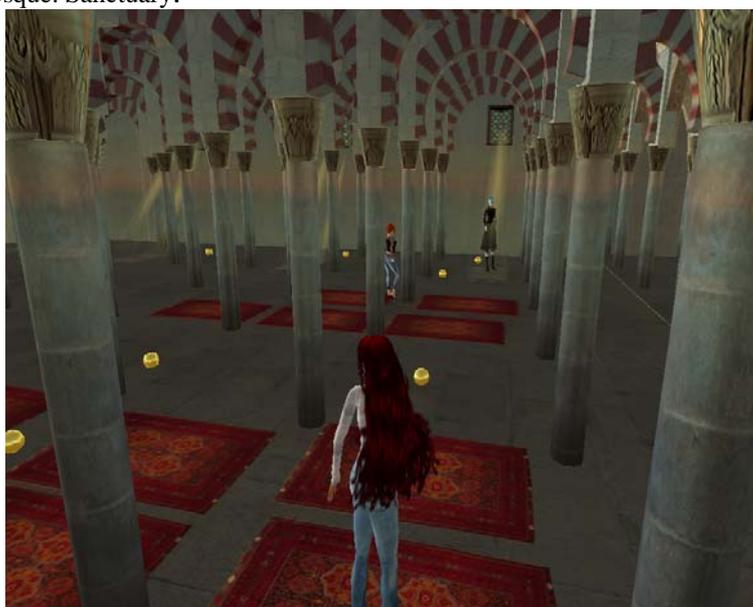
Another example of a Second Life mosque represents the **Aisha bint abi bakr mosque** in the region Qoheleth[24] which was build by a French women[25] who is also a member of the Chebi mosque group. The aim was to "(b)uilt for those of the Islamic faith. This Mosque is dedicated to the people of Islamic faith who believe in living in harmony and peace in acceptance of other persons in our world who live in other faiths."[26] In the main entrance one can get a gown – provided especially for the female avatars to dress properly. There is also the opportunity for ritualistic ablution before praying on the the prayer-rugs. Via audio-streams one can hear recitations of different suras of the Quran and different editions of the Quran itself can be downloaded.

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[21]For the in-world address see Chebi 153,212,85.

[22] For the in-world address see Al-Andalus, Al Andalus Alhambra, Al Andalus Alhambra 197, 165, 71.

[23] For the in-world address see Christian Eccleston, Calvarius, Chebi 130, 213, 84.

[24] For the in-world address see Qoheleth 84, 240, 24.

[25] Khammas 2008.

[26] Notecard received on 09/15/2007.

Figure 19: Aisha bint abi bakr mosque. Outside.

Figure 20: Aisha bint abi bakr mosque. Prayer Room.
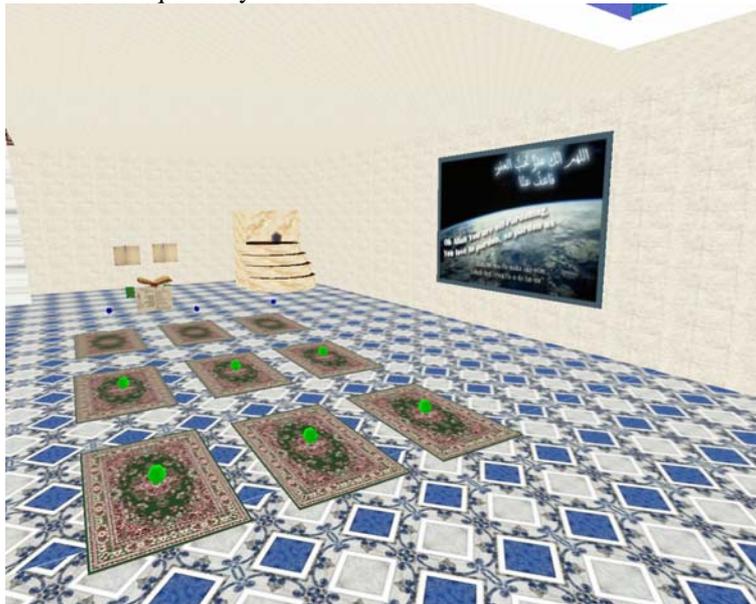
The huge Internet presence **IslamOnline.net Virtual Hajj** on http://www.islamonline.net however is currently building up a huge center and a virtual hadj including the reconstruction of Mecca with several mosques and even the black stone in Kaaba in the region IslamOnline dot Net[27] .

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[27] For the in-world address see IslamOnline dot Net 84, 51, 21.

'New Age' Cluster

As one example of a freemasonic lodge serves the **Second Life Masonic Lodge No.1** in the region Owlet.[28] Just like most buildings within Second Life it is open and can be visited by every resident. The building is centered around a 30 meter high stone obelisk. In the inner sanctum there is a table with ritual settings which can be used by every visitor.

Figure 21: Second Life Masonic Lodge No.1. Outside.

Figure 22: Second Life Masonic Lodge No.1. Interior Room.

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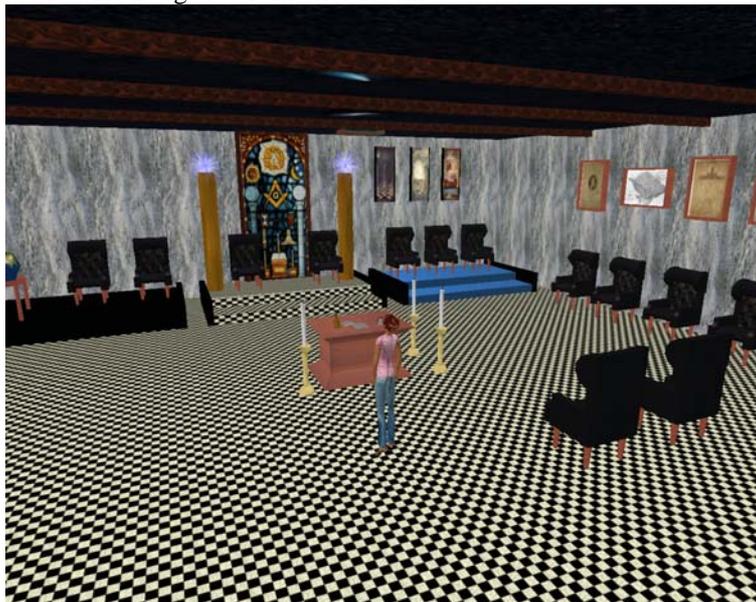
[28] For the in-world address see Owlet. 97, 103,136.

One can also find several groups such as Wiccan Covens, who like the **White Morgan Witches** which has over 100 members meet and celebrate rituals together. Every resident can freely join the "wiccan white whitch coven [...] to learn more about wicca."[29] Experienced or initiated wiccans are also welcome.

Figure 23: Second Life Group "whitemorgans witches." Notecard.
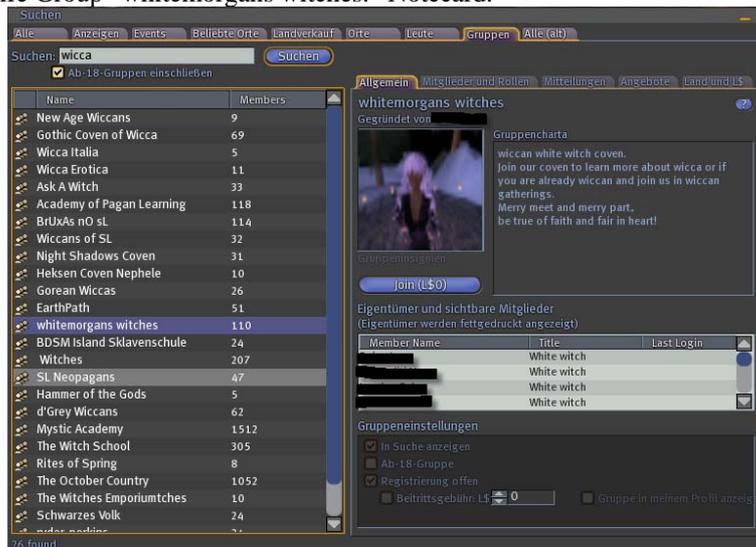
The group **Ask a Witch** (AAW) with approx. 40 members is also open for everyone. The group that developed from an AOL-group exists since 1995. The main goal is "to inform and educate people on Wicca and Witchcraft."[30] Therefore the group has an office in a mall in the region ASI Maupit where a contact usually is available.[31]

Figure 24: Second Life Group "Ask A Witch." Notecard.
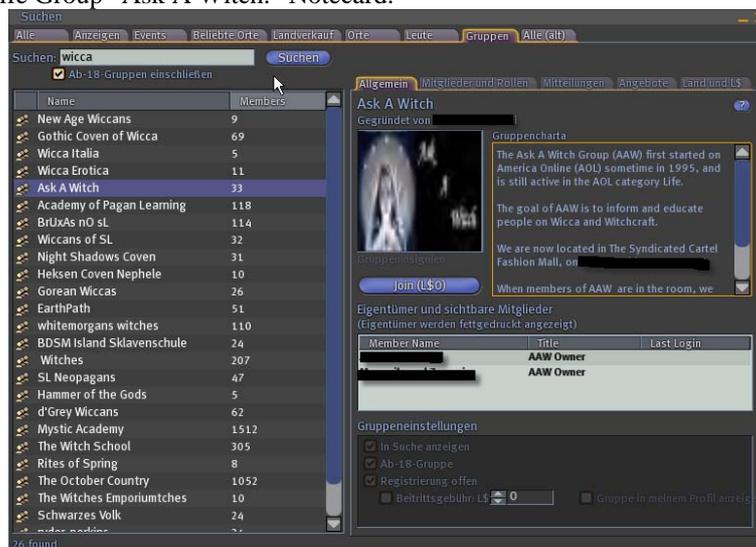
[29] Notecard received on 09/15/2007.
[30] Notecard received on 09/15/2007.
[31] For the in-world address see The Syndicated Cartel Fashion Mall, on ASI Maupiti, 75,175,450.

Buddhist Cluster

In the context of Buddhist tradition a reproduction of an offline temple founded in 1055 is represented by the Green Tara Tibetan Temple **Drolma Lhakhang** in the region Wakeley[32], where one can meditate and light candles. According to the information provided, this temple served also as a "former refuge of Atisha, one of Tibet's greatest teachers."[33] As in an offline temple it is possible to walk through an aisle with prayer wheels. In the inner room there is a thangka exhibition on the first floor which also exists in real life. On the first floor the resident can download various prayer instructions, light candles in front of photographs of the Dalai Lama and can use different animation poses. The temple is part of a bigger project founded by the organization Milarepa Land Trust, whose goal is to build ancient and modern Buddhist settings in Second Life.[34]

Figure 25: Second Life Green Tara Temple Drolma Lakhang. Outside.

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[32] For the in-world address see Wakeley 27,70,145.

[33] Notecard received on 09/15/2007.

[34] For further information see the research project „Buddhism in Second Life. Constructions for the Virtual Realm" by Heidbrink on http://www.sl-research.de.

Figure 26: Second Life Green Tara Temple Drolma Lakhang. Insight.

Another example of Buddhist traditions in Second Life is the **Buddhist Shrine of Varosha**[35] in the region Crazy Devil. „Be sure to visit the Buddhist Shrine of Varosha, a complete virtual and interactive temple for the Buddhist community. All are welcome!*All procceeds [sic!] benefit the Temple."[36] The shrine is owned by a single person who does not designate himself as a member of a special tradition or denomination. Interestingly on his notecard it says: "My spirituality and understanding has grown more in 6 months of SL than it did in 38 years of RL." Like in the Aisha bint abi bakr mosque mentioned above the visitor has the opportunity to wash his hands before spinning the prayer wheels. For meditating in front of a big statue of Varosha different things like vases or Ii Chi-exercising matts can be bought next to the open shrine. The visitor Following instructions of the matts reads as follow:

> "The Ti Chi Mat is fully animated with original animations by LeVey Palou. Just drop it to the ground, right click, choose sit and you are on your way to a happier, healthier you. Its the best exercise you can get sitting in front of your computer meditating!"[37]

On a different notecard the resident can learn something about meditation, the Three Universal Truths, the Four Noble Truths and the the Eightfold Practice in Buddhism or light a candle in front of photographs of the Dalai Lama.

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[35] For the in-world address see Crazy Devil 118,39,25.
[36] Notecard received on 09/15/2007.
[37] Notecard received on 09/15/2007.

Figure 27: Second Life Buddhist Shrine of Varosha. "Washing -Hand"-Animation-Pose.

Figure 28: Second Life Buddhist Shrine of Varosha. Prayer Wheels.

Figure 29: Second Life Buddhist Shrine of Varosha. Meditation Possibilities.

Hindu Cluster

Next to a street in the region Brauer a little shrine dedicated to the Hindu god Ganesha[38] can be found. The temple is part of a bigger shopping mall and is owned by a single person: "Come Ride the Freefall Tower and Water Slide. Ganesha Shrine, Japanese Gardens and our own Planet."[39] As in the above mentioned religious settings the resident has the opportunity to meditate, here in front of a Ganesha statue.

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[38] For the in-world address see Brauer 193, 16, 59.
[39] Notecard received on 09/15/2007.

Figure 30: Second Life Shrine to Ganesha.

Figure 31: Second Life Shrine to Ganesha. Meditation Possibility.

A temple in honor of the Hindu Goddess Shiva – the **Second Life Temple of Shiva[40]** - can be found in the region Zoshchenko. The associated group „Temple of Shiva" wanted to provide a „Temple for the celebration of all that exists, that we remember the search for truth is the search for ourselves."[41] There is also the opportunity to wash hands before meditating in front – or in the middle – of a great fire.

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[40] For the in-world address see Zoshchenko 112, 208, 92.
[41] Notecard received on 09/15/2007.

Figure 32: Second Life Temple of Shiva. Outside.

Figure 33: Second Life Temple of Shiva. "Washing -Hand"-Animation-Pose.
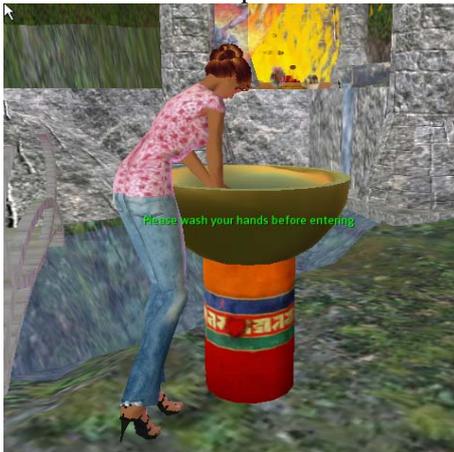
Figure 34: Second Life Temple of Shiva. Mediation-Animation in front of the Fire.

Figure 35: Second Life Temple of Shiva. Mediation-Animation within the Fire.
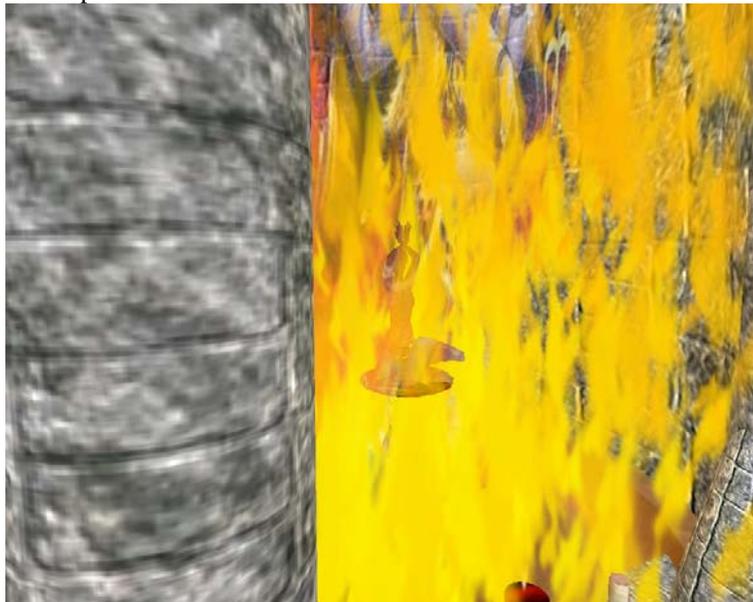
Finally a Hare Krishna temple has lately been built in Second Life. In the region Mature the resident can find **The Vedic Cultural Center of Second Life Managment**[42]. The owner and builder is – according to the information given on his notecard – a "Vaisnava and practitioner of Bhakti Yoga". Furthermore it says „I have been spreading God conciousness and relieving my neighbors of thier [sic!] material world anxieties. Pure love is the way to overcome the illusions of materialism and to realize our connection with the eternal source

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[42] For the in-world address see Cool 54, 251, 22.

and designer of all things. Hare Krishna!"[43] The main goal of the center is to „lectures religion india vishnu vedic hindu krsna voice hangout astral yoga"[44]

Alongside the opportunities for meditation are photographs and general information about the Hare Krishna tradition. The visitor can also download several e-books and music:

> "The downloadable [sic!] NITAI veda e-book program is the biggest collection of Gaudiya Vaisnava literature in one place on the net.
>
> It is compiled by H.H. Bhaktiratna Sadhu Swami Gaurangapada.
>
> The science of bhakti yoga is an artform that encompasses all facets of being. This NITAI veda is a life time of reading, to guide you on your path of bhakti yoga, culminating in ecstatic love of God.
>
> Can be read online at http://nitaai.com/nitaaiveda.html"[45]

Figure 36: Second Life Vedic Cultural Center of Second Life. Outside.

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[43] Notecard received on 09/15/2007.
[44] Notecard received on 09/15/2007.
[45] Notecard received on 09/15/2007.

Figure 37: Second Life Vedic Cultural Center of Second Life. Possibility to Music Download.

Figure 38: Second Life Vedic Cultural Center of Second Life. Meditation Possibility.

The Relevance for Religious Studies:

Actor-Related Religious Historiography

Apart from a small amount of surveys done by US scholars (See for example Taylor 2006) Virtual Worlds and the analysis of their impact on cultural presence has always been a stepchild in the scientific area nowadays. It is thus not surprising that the religious and ritualistic meaning and relevance has yet to be explored. The often doubted seriousness of peoples' actions within Virtual Worlds leads to a general scepticism towards judging these 3D

Environments as a field of investigation. The question usually raised is: "Is this just for fun?" Or in other words: Why can research on religious and ritualistic performances in Virtual Worlds be an important issue in the context of Religious Studies? The first and – I have to admit – really quite simple answer is: Because there are religious and ritualistic performances in Second Life! This may sound like an obvious conclusion but one to consider the fact, that if people have the opportunity to build another, their own and as they often state a "better" world,[46] they do indeed include and integrate religious elements.

Relevant questions for the field of Religious Studies are for example how the transfer of religious and ritualistic performances modifies the shape and content of religion, such as faith, believe etc. Religious performances or settings are a classical examples of transfer processes[47] – namely the transfer from an offline to an online context. These transfers undergo different negotiating processes. So what changes can be observed within the religious performances caused by the change of media: The most obvious change is of course the level or aspect of the participants. Due to the fact that Second Life has a so-called lag problem (that means that all the action becomes increasingly slow the more avatars there are in a special area) most meetings like worship practices or rituals can only have a restricted number of participants. Besides, questions of gender also arises: What exactly do we mean by the term "body" in this field? And how do we judge furries or fantasy dragons as a bride or groom in wedding ceremonies? And what do we do with the fact that over 60 % of male users choose a female avatar? Additionally, the influence of aesthetic factors have to be taken into account, which are especially prominent in religious performance in *Second Life*. "Aesthetics become more and more a crucial criterion for rituals and even for their efficacy."[48] This is due to the fact that everybody independent of the real life body conditions can become a supermodel with a flawless appearance. One can decide to be either a man or woman – or even a species different from his/her own. Aesthetics have thus become an important criteria for designing and performing religion and rituals.

The question of religious authority is of course linked to the religious patchworking. Therefore particular emphasis has to be laid on the economical factors of religion and rituals, which up to now have mainly slipped the attention of scholars in Religious and Ritual Studies.

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[46] See the own definition of Second Life on websites of Linden Lab the on http://secondlife.com: "A new society, a new world, created by the resident. Explore a world of surprise and adventure. Create anything you can imagine. Compete for fame, fortune, or victory. Connect with new and exciting people. Your world. Your imagination. Second Life."

[47] For the concept of Ritual Transfer see Langer et al 2006.

[48] Radde-Antweiler forthc.

Exceeding the law of supply and demand, these socio-economical aspects can create new authoritative structures within the area of religion, as can be exemplary shown by the multitude of religious suppliers in *Second Life*. In relation to this topic the question of efficacy arises as well: "Is there any efficacy?", "Is this really religious" "Why are people ascribing efficacy to religion performed in *Second Life*?"[49]

In order to find answers to these questions it is necessary to apply approaches from those disciplines that deal with related topics, like Media Studies, Social Sciences, Communication Studies, Art History among others. These methods have to be adapted to fit the requirement of the Internet as media compound and thus have to be joined to a so-called "multimethodical approach" where the singular methods serve as "tools" in a toolbox.

Applying the methods of "Virtual Ethnography" by Christine Hine (Hine 2002) a combination of different qualitative methods – all referring to the guidelines of the "Code of Ethics"[50] - the "online participant observation" has to be used. That is the observation and filming of different religious events by means of an own research avatar, expert interviews with the provider of religious services and also with the religious actor and finally the analysis of the ritual prescripts regarding processes of reception and transformation.[51] Just as in an offline context the question of research ethics has to be considered carefully.

Another topic deals with the concept of a theory of historiography of religion from an emic perspective. In contrast to earlier times, Internet sources enables the researcher to receive statements and - in the context of Virtual Worlds - also performances from the individual believers. Virtual Worlds thus show that lively and dynamic performances of religion and rituals and subsequent debates about it are not restricted to the institutionalized churches but also occur within the individual realm. Apart from representations of institutionalized religions such as the Catholic Church or different Islamic groups etc., religious discussions and self understanding are revealed not only by religious experts, but also by individual believers – in the emic perspective, 'the amateur'- In contrast to the predominant theologies that describe what a follower of a specific religion has to believe, recent analysis shows that there is a wide range of variations in the religious self understanding of individuals. The World Wide Web thereby offers a great treasure trove or pool of religious traditions, from

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[49] For Wedding Rituals and the question of efficacy see Radde-Antweiler forthc.

[50] See "Code of Ethics" on http://hewww.ucm.es/info/isa/about/isa_code_of_ethics.htm.

[51] Radde-Antweiler fortc.

which individuals can select separate pieces, combine them, and form their own personal religious beliefs – the "patchwork religion".[52]

The concept of an Actor-Related Religious Historiography[53] is associated with a change in perspective while examining religious processes. The main idea of the concept arose when after examining the history of religions or religiousness from the so-called emic perspective, it became obvious that information provided by religious individuals in previous analyses, whether it be in spoken or written form, was disregarded and/or deemed to be negligible. The introduction of qualitative and quantitative methods in social research means that e.g. interviews have become a very significant method of research when analysing contemporary religions. Now alongside to texts and archaeological records etc. testimonies by religious individuals are integrated into the research process. The manner of how texts are used in the research process has also changed significantly. Prior to the introduction of the so-called "new media", only religious experts or institutions were able to publish literature and thus had the opportunity to spreading their religious ideas and beliefs to a broader audience. Consequently, the "popularization" of the Internet has multiplied sources available to the researcher of Religious Studies. Due to the fact that it gives religious individuals the opportunity to express their beliefs it provides deeper insights into the area of Individual Religiousness as a whole independent of the authoritarian conditions of the classical book market.

Previous analyses of individual religiousness at the Institute of Religious Studies in Heidelberg[54] differ significantly from earlier research which exclusively relied on theoretical ideas of compiling religious processes and constellations following the ideas of religion as fixed systemic categories. Theories mainly based on upper class discourses on religion mean that religion is considered as being a restricted, standardized and for the most part homogeneous symbol system i.e. like a Christian theology. However when looking at religion from an emic perspective, it is evident that religion is in fact very diverse and heterogeneous, a fact which a systemic division of religious blocs fails to convey. Religious constellations have to be looked upon from a different angle ranging from the theologies of individual authors or group-specific outlines of common traditions to the beliefs and practises of religious individuals. This spectrum must also be queried on its its interdependencies and

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[52] See Radde-Antweiler forthc. b.

[53] The very haziness of the term "religious" gives rise to difficulties and not just in this respect but in the study of religions in general. The choice of word "Individual" is not just restricted to individual religiousness. It also includes religious construction processes in and around groups, institutions and dogmatists. For further details see http://www.rituals-online.de.

[54] See Heidbrink et al. 2007.

interactions as well as on its displacements and adaptations. The main methodical question thereby is how to describe the wide range of religious beliefs that exist in a single cluster. A religious cluster can be described as a collection of diverse religious beliefs of many different individuals, in other words an amalgamation of many individual clusters. The interior standardization of this system, as it is seen in the field of theology, is mostly carried out using systemic and therefore confined perspectives both internally and externally. The open style of religious clusters on the other hand means that it is possible for the researcher to operate without "restrictions".

There are individual constellations of religious traditions, in which the religious participants can select and arrange several buildings blocks from a pool of various religious traditions. There are many individual religious "patchwork" constellations which take the wide range of views that are found in traditional streams of religious thought and integrate these ideas into new, separate and situational contexts and combinations. In this context the term 'patchwork' can be understood as the mixture of various religious and secular traditional ideas that affect the respective individual, group, theology or institution that belong to the temporarily valid system. These combinations or formations differ slightly or sometimes entirely from the predominant forms of "orthodoxy" and "orthopraxy" and as such cannot be properly incorporated into the traditional version of religious historiography. Different processes of transformation and new-contextualization of previous religious traditions are thereby frequently embedded into individual religious constellations but for the most part are not problematized by religious individuals; in other words, they are not regarded as being contradictory to the system. Sometimes the processes of selection and combination result in massive boosts of innovation right up to the design of a personally and individually formed religion. From the perspective of "European History of Religions", e.g. a much wider range of contemporary Christian beliefs can be identified, than traditional theological interpretation up to now appears to suggest.

For an analysis in religious studies, all the various elements or parts of the individual cluster must be taken into consideration as subjects to the numerous patchwork processes. At this stage of investigation however the intentional patchworking must be distinguished from the unconscious patchworking. As a further complication, the clusters are also subject to dynamic processes, resulting As a further complication, the elements the clusters consist of underlie dynamic processes, resulting in the clusters themselves being fluid and difficult to grasp.

However the concept of *Actor-Related Religious Historiography* is not just to be regarded as an accumulation of separate religious structures or in other words as an analysis of individual religiousness. It also attempts to integrate group-dynamic processes. This is the logical next step when focussing on the emic perspective. An analysis must also consider the fact that the emic perspective does not just consist individual religious constellations, but also includes processes such as group formations and distinctions made by other individuals etc. Thus an analysis of group processes must also differentiate between the different kinds of group-participation. Within religious settings different levels of participants' involvement can be distinguished, ranging from actors to whom a professional role is assigned (e.g theologians) up to so called passive recipients. Additionally, there is a number of actors which does not take part in the process but nevertheless influences the group and their religious beliefs. In general, classifications and discussions that arise from inside the group must be distinguished from those that are attributed from outside, be it an academic or political or popular discourse.

To sum up one can say that the concept of *Actor-Related Religious Historiography* is not just about describing 'the religion' of individuals. It rather intends to develop a new way of writing religious historiography, one which does not imply former 'systemic' theories but includes the fluidity of historical religious processes and thus also the level of the religious actors themselves. Conclusively it is self-evident that the design of every historiography has to be understood as a constructive process which is on the one hand determined by compiling, emphasizing, choosing and omitting data and on the other hand by establishing a meaningful correlation of it.[55] The concept of *Actor-Related Religious Historiography* strives to change the view on religious history by including data that prior to the emergence of the World Wide Web and Virtual Worlds has been invisible and thus been neglected.

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[55] See Stenger, 17: „(j) Form der Geschichtsschreibung (..) als konstruktiver Vorgang zu verstehen, der durch Zusammenstellen, hervorheben, auswählen, weglassen von 'Daten', sowie die spezifische Art und Weise, eine sinnhafte Beziehung zwischen den gewählten Daten herzustellen, bestimmt ist."

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