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Introduction

Fabienne Duteil-Ogata, Isabelle Jonveaux, Liliane Kuczynski, Sophie Nizard
translation: Gabrielle Varro

1 Religion in the Internet: Texts and Contexts

In the course of the 1990s, the Internet extended into every area of society and social life. It turned thirty in 2013 and Facebook, that symptomatic space where the new generations of the interactive Web (Web 2.0) make their first appearance, celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2014. Whether it represented an until-then unmatched opportunity to spread messages nearly universally (Lévy 1994) or a threat to the social link due to rampant individualism (Breton 2000), the French social sciences have evaluated the ever-larger place occupied by the virtual positively or negatively, depending on the analyses carried out.

The religious participates fully in the ongoing digital revolution and religions have adapted relatively quickly to technological modernity. In some cases they have actually led the way. Today, the religious phenomenon – whether we consider official religions or the religious in general – is abundantly present on the web; the Internet is even capable of becoming the target of a belief or cult itself. The most recent events in France too – the terrorist attacks in Paris in January 2015 – cast a harsh light on the worldwide use of the Internet by persons engaged in radical islamism.

Research on the subject first began in Anglo-Saxon countries in the late 1990s. In 1996, Stephen O'Leary, an American specialist of religions and communications was one of the first to stress the major impact the Internet was having on the development and dissemination of religions, an impact he thought was tantamount to the invention of the printing press. According to him, the Internet today plays the role of sacred space (O'Leary 1996). Since that pioneering study, research has proliferated, confirming or nuancing that point of view. Among the wealth of English-language studies, we have chosen to mention some of the main themes that surfaced over the past twenty years.[1] Christopher Helland (2000), for instance, makes a fine distinction between 'religion online'

1 A more detailed description and many references can be found in the article by Heidi Campbell (2006), 'Religion and the Internet', *Communication Research Trends*, vol. 25, no. 1, viewed 21 October 2014,

(religious contents accessible on the Web) and 'online religion' (experiencing mysticism through the medium of the Internet). The term cyber-religion was also rapidly introduced and, from an epistemological viewpoint, would seem to designate a religion existing exclusively in the cybernetic space (Hojsgaard 2005). Another pioneer in the field of relations between the Internet and the religious, Heidi Campbell, uses the expression 'religion online' for "the form traditional and non-traditional religious practices and discourses take when they appear on the Internet" (Campbell 2006, p. 3).[2] The work carried out by this scholar,[3] or by Mia Lövheim, and many collective ventures too, such as the volumes directed by Lorne Dawson and Douglas Cowan or by Morten Hojsgaard and Margit Warburg, among many other publications, bear witness to the vitality of this field of research (Dawson & Cowan 2004; Hojsgaard & Warburg 2005).

The essential contribution of the present online journal must also be acknowledged: *The Online Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* endeavors to publish and disseminate work done on the topic.

On the French side, thinking out the question of digital cultures generally shaped up only later. In the introduction to his book *Les liaisons numériques* (Casilli 2010), Antonio Casilli shows how difficult it was, towards the end of the 1990s, to establish the study of digital networks as a subject for the social sciences in France. In fact, work in this area remained sparse for a long time, limited to publications specialized on networking or the media.[4] Sociologists and anthropologists carried out field work, both on- and offline, mainly on the themes of sociability, identity building and 'bricolage'. Questions concerning the cyber-space, the relations to the body or the nature of the connections wrought by Internet users were the main points analyzed and debated (Casilli 2010; Pastinelli 2007). This field of research, still wide open, extends today to the investigation of 'digital cultures' and 'digital humanities' in the most varied sectors such as games, illness, publishing, art or intimate relationships (Casilli 2011; Lardellier 2012; Bergström 2013; Rubio 2013; Beunet 2013).

French scholars are presently also concerned with methodology. In 2013, during the conference preceding this publication, the first textbook to analyze the Web written for social science specialists came out (Barats 2013). A timely occurrence for many scholars caught up in the

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<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-145983341.html>, as well as in (2012), 'Understanding the relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 80, no. 1, pp. 64-93. Also see Rosalind I. J. Hackett (2005), 'Religion et Internet', *Diogène*, vol. 211, no. 3, pp. 86-99.

2 Morten T. Hojsgaard stresses nevertheless that a pure cyber-religion can only be a fiction, since a website requires at least one webmaster who exists and performs in the real world.

3 See Campbell, H 2005, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We Are One in the Network*, Peter Lang, New York. We should also mention a larger network initiated in 2010 by this researcher: *Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture Studies*, an incomparable source for all those working on the religious and the Internet, or on the Web as a field for research. Viewed 27 March 2015, <http://digitalreligion.tamu.edu/>.

4 See e.g. the journals *Réseaux* and *Hermès*.

process of thinking out the methods to apply in the particular case of analyzing digital productions: contents, social practices, usages, flux. It shows that mastering the technical aspects, though not absolutely central to the process, must at any rate be taken into account by researchers.[5]

As a point of entry for studies on the Internet, the religious has long escaped analysis, though in the pioneering works it figured already, e.g. in references to the religious atmosphere surrounding the media (Breton 2000), or in essays pointing out the alliance between religion and techno-science (Sallenave 2004) or yet again in the relationship between the Internet and Utopian discourse (Serfaty 1999).

But it was above all in their own fieldwork that French researchers became aware of, and had to take into account, the irruption of the Internet in the expression and organization of the religious phenomena they were in the process of examining. In one of the first articles on the theme, entitled *Les dieux sur le Net. L'essor des religions d'origine africaine aux États-Unis* ("Gods on the Net. The rise of native African religions in the United States"), ethnologist Stefania Capone studied the presence on the Web of African-American initiates who developed new versions of the African origins of their cults (at the root of many political issues). In putting the question of how the local and the global, the virtual and the physical interconnect, the author notes that "it is therefore on the World Wide Web that the lines of changes to come in the universe of African-American religions are drawn" (Capone 1999, p. 68, trans. G.V.). Since the start of the years 2000, several other researchers have analyzed the upheavals triggered by the use of the Internet in their respective fields. Concerning the appearances of the Virgin Mary, Paolo Apolito (2003) noted that the traditional tension between institutional authority and personal charisma no longer prevailed. Céline Choucouron-Gurung (2007) noted the obsolescence of tools permitting an offline control of Jehovah Witnesses in France in the face of the controversies they unleash on the Internet. As to Cécilia Calheiros (2012), she analyzes the fabrication and visibility of an eschatological prediction for the end of 2012 by applying a predictive software, the 'WebBot Project', initially conceived to anticipate the oscillations of the stock market.

A fair number of French language studies have been devoted to the upsurge of Islam online. During the 1990s, representatives of 'official' Islam as well as well-known personalities belonging to the political opposition got hold of the new media and used them to publish and distribute. Thanks to the development of the interactive Internet, new sectors emerged: online fatwas, religious instruction and question-and-answer websites based on daily life. 'New ulamas'[6] can thus be heard (Anderson 2003; Gonzalez-Quijano 2000; Houot 2003). Olivier Roy (2000, 2002), one of the first

5 Also see the methods proposed for analyzing Facebook in the article: Bastard, I, Cardon, D, Fouetillou, G, Prieur, C & Raux, S (2013), *Travailleurs et travailleurs de la donnée*, Internet Actu.net, viewed 5 January 2015, <http://www.internetactu.net/2013/12/13/travail-et-travailleurs-de-la-donnee/>.

6 The expression 'new ulamas' is borrowed from the work by Olivier Roy and Malika Zeghal.

scholars to have become interested in the theme, noted already in 2000, that on the Web, "there is no undisputed authority" (2000, p. 222) and came up with hypotheses on the reasons why the Salafist message was the most apt to constitute a virtual Umma (2000, p. 230).

In a more global perspective, Jean-Francois Mayer, in his book *Internet et religion* (2008) analyzes a large number of religious websites. It was and for a long while remained the reference in French to describe the various ways the religious was present online. In it, the author developed the notion of 'cybersacré'.

In her book *Dieu en ligne* (2013) Isabelle Jonveaux, one of the first French scholars to place the presence of religion on the Internet at the heart of her investigations, analyzed how the medium is used by Catholic 'religious virtuosi', also pointing out its limits. She concentrates mainly on the presence and visibility of the religious on the social networks.

It is however necessary to point out that in France such studies are still rather few and far between.

The aim of the present digital publication is to present one of the first collective attempts to think out religion on the Internet in France from the point of view of the social sciences. The originality of the approach lies in the diversity of the religious contexts considered and in its pluridisciplinary nature, where sociology, anthropology, history and the sciences of communication all take part.

But, though innovative and pioneering, the present study is nevertheless also part of an on-going, dynamic movement which in the coming years will witness an intensification of the interrogations, research programs and publications on the theme. We must not forget in particular the recent issue of the journal *Médiation et information* (eds Douyère, Dufour & Riondet 2014), dedicated to the study of the communicational dimension of religions;[7] or again, among other on-going research projects, the ANR ENEID program, *Eternités numériques, identités numériques post mortem et usages mémoriaux innovants du web au prisme du genre* ("Digital Eternities, digital post mortem identities and new, gendered, memorial practices on the Web") (2014-2018) which means to look at both France and China in comparative perspective.[8]

7 The volume brings together articles following work carried out by the Network Relicom between 2010 and 2013. The network's websites can be consulted on: http://relicom.jimdo.com/; and http://relicom.hypotheses.org/.

8 An international research network on the same theme was set up following the The First International Death Online Research Symposium held in Durham in 2013: "dead on line research", http://deathonlineresearch.net.

2 The questions underlying this publication

This publication means to explore the ways the Internet and Religions relate by replacing them in specific cultural and religious contexts. Our objective is to forefront in-depth analysis of the relations between the Internet and religions and to grasp the socio-cultural changes induced by the arrival of the digital in the religious sphere. Is it just one more medium through which contents can be disseminated, or does the Internet produce deep-seated transformations – and if so, in what realms and in what ways?

It is above all necessary to look into the concept of religious community in order to understand in what way digital and interactive communication leads us to reconsider the concept in the light of new behavior patterns, most often limited to a type of self-presentation, or to building an 'online self'. But at the same time, is Internet not also where one's identity, veiled or even totally masked by one's pseudo, allows for behavior that shows either great trust or an unconcern that anonymity alone permits (Jonveaux 2013)? Also, the Web becomes the place where collective identities are expressed, a place where an online community can be reasserted or built up (Lardellier 2012). What about the 'virtual' nature of these communities? How do Internet users occupy those spaces, how do they interact among themselves?

This brings us to the need to reconsider the traditional conceptions of time and space, to take their relative dwindling into account. How are relations between the center and the periphery reorganized online, between the local and the global, between private and public spaces? Are we seeing a reinforcement of local anchorings or an intensification of religious globalization? How does the Internet cause the ways of setting up transnational networks to evolve, does it guarantee a connection between geographically distant communities? Should the analyses in terms of diasporas (Niculescu) be resumed afresh?

Religious authority too is being readjusted on the Web (Niculescu; Obadia; Jonveaux 2013; Kirschleger). Is doubt not being cast on traditional religious authority? And what of the growing visibility of the minority movements that lay claim to a place in the sun on the Web? Is the Internet just one more medium at the disposal of religious groups or is it fundamentally transforming relations of power and authority? This raises the issue of religious legitimacy, dissidence, counter-powers and the places where they can be voiced, and of lay opposition. What do religious groups choose to show of themselves in terms of content, image and virtual identities? Do they exert control over their websites?

We also thought it important to elucidate practices and rituals on the Internet (Jonveaux 2013; Duteil-Ogata; Kirschleger). In fact, over and beyond issues of visibility and communication, the presence of the religious on the Web poses the delicate question of the possibility of religious

practice online, the forms it takes and its eventual limits. The Internet seems to permit forms of re-inventing the religious, forms of hybridity and ritual 'bricolage'.

Following this line of thought, does not the technical tool itself sometimes become the object of a cult? Do digital media give way to new forms of religiosity? How do rituals on the Internet make do with the absence of the carnal envelope which did seem indispensable for a certain number of traditional religious activities such as conversion, confession, funeral rites?

Another interrogation tackled by all the authors concerns the continuity or lack of it between offline and online religious manifestations. Do those who use digital media for their religious practice already practice religion in offline reality? Are online and offline practices complementary? Are there religious practices that have been observed online exclusively?

Anglo-Saxon studies often focus on online practices; French research tends to compare online and offline rituals – shuttling between the two and attempting to pinpoint the offline effects of what transpires online and vice-versa. Most of the French-speaking participants at the conference that led to the present publication usually explicitly refer to fieldwork carried out offline with an eye to comparing the two forms of presence. They pay attention to the way the religious on the Internet may radically transform the 'real'. But it is precisely that question of the relationship between offline and online reality – for which a bad habit often makes one employ the term 'virtual' – that interests the authors. Are the borders between offline and online still relevant?

To conclude, the present analysis implies that each author has thought out their methodology in depth. The new technologies force scholars to question their own positioning, to ask themselves which methods to implement in this particular context. How does one define and circumscribe an area of research on the Internet? How can the main actors online be identified, how can they be accessed? Who are the 'conceptors' - those who create the websites, decide on their content and their organization? Is it the already existing offline religious institutions, or self-appointed leaders, or radical groups that find new audiences, a new legitimacy on the Internet …? What use do they make of the written word and the image? What becomes of the research scholar behind the screen? Are there tools available to broach the religious on the Internet or must they be totally reinvented or created from scratch?

It may seem simple to carry out a content analysis of the websites at our disposal thanks to their visibility – is it not that very visibility that defines them? However, it is indispensable to grasp the way they are received and the uses to which they are put.

We asked the authors of the group to pay careful attention to all these questions. Each has answered according to their discipline and the specifics of their field of investigation.

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New Funeral Practices in Japan

From the Computer-Tomb to the Online Tomb

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Translation: Gabrielle Varro

Abstract

Since the 1990's, Japan has seen its funeral practices become increasingly diverse. New forms appear which will simplify or replace traditional Buddhist practices. Less expensive, these new funeral practices stress the separation between the space of ashes and the space of worship practices, which means a dematerialization of the deceased person. The case study of computer-tomb becoming an online-tomb is a good example of this trend. After a quick overview on Japanese traditional funeral practices to illustrate the context of the computer and online-tombs, I examine in details the features of computer-tomb and online-tombs of several persons and answer to those questions. Are those practices considered as Buddhist practices? How can reality and virtuality be connected together? How is the absence of body managed by the computer-tomb and online-tomb? Does the grave-online appear as the ultimate answer to the funeral proceedings - on a physical and spiritual level - in the Japanese funeral approach?

Keywords

Buddhism, funeral practices, online tomb, Japan, ancestor worship, collective tombs for eternal Buddhist rituals

"And what would you say about ordinateur? The word is correctly formed,
and can even be found in the Littré as an adjective for God
putting the world in order."
Jacques Perret, professor of Latin philology at IBM France
(letter of June 16, 1955), p. 67 *in* Aurélien Bellanger,
La théorie de l'information Paris, Gallimard, 2012.

1 Introduction

Since the 1990s in Japan, funeral practices have diversified and new ways of funerary practices have emerged, though as yet they remain in the minority (Duteil-Ogata, 2012). Often the new ways depend on the fact that the space dedicated to the burial is separated from the space allotted to religious ritual, which ends up by generating a multitude of representations of the deceased. The computer-tomb with access to the internet – on its way to becoming exclusively an online tomb – is a case in point.

Based on on-going fieldwork, this article scrutinizes the two types of tombs. Do they actually imply new religious practices and if so, do they interfere with the ones existing off-line and how is the absence of body compensated for in the new ways of burying the dead?

After a rapid overview of traditional Japanese funeral practices (off-line) – which should allow us to visualize the environments of virtual and online graves – I will attempt to show the differences or on the contrary the continuity prevailing with respect to offline practices, as well as what the new systems are producing. My data is drawn from the evidence provided by the initiator of the new systems, or by the individuals who actually put them to use.

2 Traditional offline funeral practices in Japan

It must first be remembered that traditional Japanese religion is based on syncretism; over time it has assimilated the two major religious traditions, Shintoism and Buddhism. The first are animists and polytheists: in Shintoism, men, gods, nature and objects are all of an identical nature because driven by the same vital forces (*tama*), thereby creating an ontological continuity. Shintoism stresses the immanence of the world and concentrates on life on earth, even though according to its eschatology, the deceased becomes first an ancestor, then a tutelary divinity. The eschatology of

Buddhism is more elaborate, consisting in individual “salvation-liberation” wherein the deceased is usually designated by the term *hotoke*, a word that means both the deceased and buddha (every deceased person is a potential buddha). Buddhism thus takes over the burial practices that Shinto abandoned, considering death a state of extreme pollution in contradiction with the purity of its deities. The process of “ancestralization” is therefore a Buddhist competence; however, at the end of the ritual cycle, on condition the Buddhist rites were carried out according to rule, the ancestor can also enter the Shinto pantheon and become a protector of his/her original community and answer people’s desires (Yanagita, 1988).

Thus, thanks to a series of ancestral rites generally lasting thirty-three or fifty years – depending on which Buddhist school of thought is being followed[1] – the deceased becomes an individualized ancestor. He/she posthumously takes on a Buddhist name and as ancestor, protects the family line. The various rituals allowing the process to be implemented are carried out by the monks in the Buddhist temples.

Traditionally, families affiliated from generation to generation in the male line to a specific Buddhist temple participate in its economic livelihood by contributing to funeral expenses (550.000 yens),[2] as well as to the ceremony confirming the posthumous name (*kaimyo*) (250.000 yens), to the many post-mortem rituals, and to tending the grave in the temple’s graveyard (photo n° 1). The families generally form an association that, assisted by one of the monks, manages the goods of the monastic community.

Another reason why Buddhism was directly related to the treatment of deceased dates back to Edo period (1603– 1868) when the Tokugawa Shoguns legally decided to delegate the task of constituting registers of the whole population to Buddhist temples all over Japan, and requested that every household be affiliated with a local Buddhist temple and proceed to hold a Buddhist funeral and perform postmortem rituals (Tamamuro, 1997). The relationship between Japanese family and their local Buddhist temple still persists, being based on parishioner membership (*danka seido,* parishioner system).

Without going into details, here are a few indications concerning the basic funeral practices that punctuate the process of ancestralization. When a person dies, 98% of the time they are cremated (Picone, M 2007). After a mourning period of forty-nine days, punctuated by rituals every seven days, the urn (holding the ashes and bones) is placed in the family tomb in the graveyard of the Buddhist temple. A mortuary tablet (*ihai*), engraved with the posthumous name of the deceased, is then placed in the domestic Buddhist altar (*butsudan*) of the family home of the designated

1 Most of the Buddhist schools perform ancestral rites until thirty-three years, but Jôdoshinsû is an exception performing the last ancestor ritual to fifty years or one hundred years, (Shintani, T & Sekisawa, M, 2005, p. 275).

2 In 2013, one euro was worth *ca*. 145 yens. Thus, a donation for a funeral came to approximately 3,800 euros, a considerable amount in Japan.

religious heir (photo n° 2), along with the funeral portrait of the deceased (*iei*), both slightly above the rest of the display. Thus, the burial rites are carried out in two separate places: at the tomb on the grounds of the temple where the remains of the deceased are deposited (photo n° 1) and at the Buddhist altar of the family home (photo n° 2).

Post-mortem rituals guarantee the process of ancestralization. Honoring the ancestors at the Buddhist family altar and the “visit to the grave” (*ohaka mairi*) are the most important funeral practices. The number of visits to the grave and/or of rituals at the family altar of course vary from one household to the next, but generally speaking, the monk performing a ceremony at the tomb and/or in front of the family altar follows two calendars:

1. the timetable directly connected to the anniversary of the death, which starts right after the wake and extends over a period of thirty-three or fifty/one hundred years, the rituals being carried out once a month the first year, then spread out over time: they are scheduled on the third, fifth, seventh, thirteenth, seventeenth, twenty-fifth, twenty-seventh and thirty-third year.
2. the calendar of yearly rituals which is the same for all the deceased. They take place during the Spring equinox in mid-March, the Autumn equinox in mid-September, and during the “summer festival of the dead” (*obon*) on July 15th or August 15th (depending of area).

At the end of the commemorative rituals, the deceased has lost his/her individual identity, and the mortuary tablet enshrined in the Buddhist family altar is removed. It is donated to the Buddhist temple to which the family is affiliated, or buried in the graveyard, or thrown in the flames or the river (Shintani, T & Sekisawa, M, 2005). Also, the funeral photograph is withdrawn from the domestic space. Thus, only the tomb remains to perpetuate the trace of the deceased engraved in stone, and the actual presence of the body after the process of ancestralization.

The visits to the grave of the deceased can obviously take place on days other than those set by the two calendars, to burn incense, refresh the flowers, tend the grave and say a prayer. The same goes for worshiping the ancestors at the Buddhist family altar (offerings of tea, cooked rice, fruit or cakes, incense, flowers) that also take place every day. But it must be admitted that in our day the tomb is often located in the ancestor’s place of birth, far from the large cities where the families in charge of worshiping the ancestors live, which means that such visits become less frequent. Also, the lack of space of urban housing hardly allows everyone to accommodate the Buddhist family altar (*butsudan*) (photo n° 2) in the room containing the tatamis (*butsuma*) (Duteil-Ogata, 2013), despite its size to be reduced to its most basic elements. Another factor challenging ancestor worship and other such traditional practices is the growing number of childless people or parents who do not want to impose long and costly customs upon their descendents.

3 The first virtual tomb with access to the internet (*dennôhaka*)

The concept of “virtual tomb” developed by the Buddhist monk Matsushima Nyokai, head of the Kudoku temple of the Shingon school in Tokyo and presented in his book *The revolution of the tomb on the Internet - Virtual tombs*, (Matsushima, N 1997) attempts to respond to these societal changes.

He explains in his preface that since the second half of the 1980s Japan has been confronted by a “cremation revolution”. Technology permits raising the temperature to 1000° Celsius, so that the body is totally consumed, the bones decomposed and the DNA no longer identifiable. According to him, humanity is entering a new era: “a new time of funerals without bones”, marked by the end of individual identification; tombs and cemeteries have become completely useless. To make up for the absence of individuality, he imagined a solution applying digital technology: the computer and the Internet allow recording individual memories and information thanks to sound, imagery and text. Personal data is thus archived in a virtual space, instead and in place of DNA. The “computer-tomb with access to the Internet” was born (photo n° 3).

Practical implementation

Available to all, without distinction of faith or creed, this tomb is placed in the precinct of the temple and, since 2006, offers unrelated individuals the possibility to subscribe to a personal, thirty-three year contract during their lifetime. The set price is kept down to a minimum (250.000 yens), and includes the safekeeping of the ashes, performing the “everlasting rituals”, a 90-second personalized digital sequence, rights to access the tomb (by smartcard or password) and the choice of visitors. The option to access the internet has existed since 2009 but in 2011 only a dozen people had chosen to do so.

In other words, computer-tombs fall into the category of *eitai kuyôbo* “collective tombs for eternal Buddhist rituals” (Butsuji Gaido Henshubu, 2007), not into the category of family tombs. Therefore what we are dealing with here is the respect owed to the deceased but not the tradition of ancestor worship: no heir is assigned, no procedure of ancestralization undertaken; the everlasting rituals are simply performed by the monks in the temple the 3rd of each month, in order to appease the dead (photo n° 3). It should nevertheless be noted that the duration of the contract is fixed at thirty-three years, the traditional Buddhist time-span for the ancestralization process. Another consequence is that there is no association of families belonging to the parish of the Buddhist temple, nor any meetings organized – which does not make it easy for the ethnologist to make contacts …

One meter-twenty high, like a traditional headstone (photo n° 1), the tomb nevertheless has the convex shape of a contemporary grave. Part of the ashes of each of the subscribers are encased

in the collective receptacle placed to the rear of the computer. The rest is deposited at the main Kudoku temple in Beppu, in the island of Kyushu in the South of Japan. Despite its collective character, the person's individuality is at the heart of the system. The digital sequence, for instance, partly preformatted, gives the subscriber the opportunity to compose his/her own self-portrait using written and visual data.

The sequence representing the monk's dead mother can be freely accessed on the temple's website.[3] The first slide shows her given name, her posthumous Buddhist name, her dates of birth and death. Compared to a classical tomb, that is a first transformation. For, though generally those four elements of biographical information are engraved on traditional tombs, they are secondary and relegated to the rear or side of the headstone. What immediately appears on the face of a traditional tomb, in large letters, is not individual data but the name of the family, of the family group, of the house (*ie*).

Furthermore, on this computer-tomb the scriptural presentation of those four facts can be personalized:[4] the wallpaper can be selected among several depicting the beyond (clouds, the sea), or the seasons (floral patterns such as cherry trees in bloom, or reeds). Likewise, the direction of the writing can vary (top to bottom, following the order of traditional script, or left to right, following the order of modern writing), it can occupy both sides of the photograph or one side only. To this necrological information, the person is free to deliver, on a supplementary page, the message he/she desires, a sort of testimonial as it were.

The second element chosen by the subscriber is visual: the photograph. Two registers are available: the traditional funeral portrait (*iei*) and the photo album.[5] The portrait of the deceased can be framed in black as was the traditional funeral photo, or simply reproduced. It should be noted that choosing portraits to represent the human, highlighting the face (seat of the five senses), is meaningful: the deceased once again belongs to the world of feeling and, thanks to the magic of photography that captured a fleeting expression, lives on in the portrait. The other pictures, limited to four, are arranged on one page, like in a photo album, composing a visual narrative.[6] In chronological order, the series of photographs form a significant whole, illustrating different periods of the life of the deceased. The narrative generally focuses on the family or life in the neighborhood. The other parts of the digital sequence are preformatted and identical for all the subscribers. Access is available on the spot in the Kudoku temple by inserting a card in the computer-tomb or *via* the internet by entering a code.

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3 Cf. http://www.haka.co.jp/CyberStoneInfo/profile/display.html consulted June 13, 2013.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.

Crystalline music accompanies the 90-second visit from beginning to end. Against a background of lotus flowers,[7] the visitor is instructed to insert his/her card or code. Four landscapes representing the four seasons unfold, that also symbolize the life-cycle: Spring by cherry trees in bloom, Summer by fireworks, Autumn by golden maple leaves, Winter by snow. At the end of the introduction –in which patience is recommended to the visitor – the self-portrait of the deceased appears (his/her photo, the name by which he/she was commonly known, posthumous name, date of birth and death). Then come the four photographs and the deceased person's message; they make up the longest sequence and that is when the visitor can mourn or pray. To terminate the visit, the lotus flowers return to the screen and a standard phrase thanks the visitor and wishes him/her a good return-trip home.[8]

A new representation of the deceased and new post-mortem practices

It must be said that, compared to the non-religious features such as the landscapes, the pictures of the deceased and his/her message, those 90 seconds clearly make little direct reference to Buddhism (one can just about glimpse a hint of symbolism in the lotus flower, and there is of course the posthumous Buddhist name). Even more surprising is the absence of offerings, omnipresent on the virtual tombs of internet websites (because they are very lucrative).[9] The offerings, which constitute the main part of ancestor worship, do not seem necessary in the case of the "computer-tomb" because the aim of the visit is not to contribute to an ancestralization ritual but to appease the deceased and build a new relationship with him/her. I encountered Madame M., 52 years old, and her daughter, 24, during the ceremony performed by the monks on July 3, 2011 (photo n° 3). They explained the choice of tomb as follows:

> "My husband died two years ago, after a long illness, and since we have only one daughter, it is not possible to carry on the ancestor worship (inherited along the male line). So we looked for a collective tomb for eternal worship, and since my husband and I liked this neighborhood, especially when the cherry trees are in bloom, we chose this place …"

Although we come to the temple every month, the 3rd for the ceremony and the 25th for the anniversary of my husband's death, the fact the grave is connected to the internet means we can visit him whenever we want. Internet is part of our everyday life. We can see him on our cell-phones." Her daughter then brought out her portable phone and showed me how easy it was to see her father right then and there and pay him a visit …

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7 Cf. http://www.haka.co.jp/CyberStoneInfo/profile/application.html consulted June 13, 2013.
8 Ibid.
9 Be it in Japan or elsewhere, one of the economic features of the virtual tomb market is the profit margin of companies at the head of virtual tomb websites selling funerary offerings.

> "It's me and my daughter who chose the photos, we chose the pictures before he fell sick. They're family pictures: our wedding, the birth of our daughter ..."

Like others, this declaration reveals that family members, rather than the person when alive, take charge of the pictures and the virtual narrative. Also, though the mediation of the internet does create a different relationship to time, *i.e.* a new temporality – on-the-spot visits to the grave at all hours of day or night, ignoring the rigid order of ritual calendars – people continue to attend the ceremonies on specific dates. Internet connections also generate a different relationship to space; geographic distances seem abolished or reduced due to the immediacy of the connection, physical displacements are theoretically no longer necessary. However, interviewees seem to care about the choice of place of internment (of the concrete tomb), access to the internet does not totally rule out physical displacements (for those who can travel) and virtual visits to the grave continue to take place along with actual visits *in situ* to the computer-tomb.

Concerning the content of post-mortem rituals, a visit to the computer-tomb is more like a remembrance ceremony than a religious ritual; it is the memory of the deceased that is being honored through his/her visual and scriptural representation, even if some religious attributes still endure such as the posthumous Buddhist name or the funeral photograph on the digital sequences, the rituals carried out by the monk in front of the tomb or the offerings of flowers and incense, rare nonetheless (photo n° 3).

4 The second computer-tomb

Having learned from his first experiment, the monk decided in 2009 to open another computer-tomb (photo n° 4). Like the preceding one, it is a collective grave for everlasting worship with a ceremony on the 8th of each month and a thirty-three year concession. Similarly, a part of the ashes is deposited in the computer-tomb in Tokyo, the rest kept in the main temple in Beppu. But differently from the first computer-tomb where accessing the internet was only an option, the second tomb includes access to the internet *via* a PC or portable telephone; it is a bit more expensive but the price remains very reasonable (500,000 yens) compared to a traditional grave. The digital sequence has been simplified, with only three slides remaining: the photo of the deceased – but this time without mentioning the posthumous name – the album of four photos-souvenirs and the deceased's written message. Between March 2009 and December 2010, 67 persons had signed up for this tomb. In July 2011, about 50 others had done so, *i.e.* a total of 130.

Madame K., 71 years old, is one of them. She explains that her husband died in 2010; then, taking a small cloth purse out of her handbag, she shows me her husband's portable mortuary tablet (*ihai*) (photo n° 5). "I have it on me at all times, she adds, he follows me everywhere." The little tablet is part of an option on the contract and quite a successful one according to the monk.

> "I chose this spot, she says, because with my husband we used to walk near the temple and he noticed the cherry trees in bloom. So when I heard about the grave with everlasting worship, I was overjoyed. Some tombs had an access to the internet and I thought to myself, that's the solution! Because my husband's brothers live in the South of Japan in Kagoshima (island of Kyûshû) and in Hiroshima, it's hard for them to visit his grave, one of them can hardly walk anymore. This way, they can visit his grave on-line, I gave them the identifier and the password and sent them to my nephews and nieces too. It's me who chose the photos. My husband loved cats, and that's one of the last pictures of him when he was healthy. For the photo album I chose a picture of him young, then a few more recent ones: his last summer, him and his taxi, he was a taxi driver, and then when he turned sixty (*kanreki*).[10] The message is mine too, I wrote it: 'Yochan loved kids, he was loved and respected by everybody. The fact you're here gives me joy, we became happy and nice thanks to you. Thank you.'"[11]

Here again the digital portrait (photograph and text) was not done by the person during his lifetime but by family members, the message however was meant for the deceased but for the family too. This time, in this new computer-tomb, Buddhist symbolism has completely disappeared: no traditional funeral portrait, no pictures of lotus flowers, no posthumous Buddhist name. But the fact that Madame K. has her husband's portable mortuary tablet (*ihai*) on her at all times – the new practice of handy funeral objects –(Yamasaki, 2007)[12] shows that being physically close to the symbolic Buddhist representation of the deceased remains important. In the same way, she continues to go regularly to the temple in Tokyo to attend the ceremonies if front of the computer-tomb. There again, as with Madame M., virtual visits to the grave are added to the visits *in situ*, they do not cancel them. Which is not the case for the other members of the family, for whom visits to

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10 "Turning sixty" literally means "the return of the calendar". Originally a Chinese celebration, it marks the end of the cycle of the Zodiac of sixty years of life. On their sixtieth birthday, the person is thus entering the first year of a new cycle and in a way returning to babyhood, which is why they are given a red garment: the homophony of the term "aka-chan" that designates the baby and the color red (aka), is mainly a sort of cape, a bonnet and also a cushion.

11 Author's translation of the original Japanese message: [illegible]

12 Handy funerary objects belong to the new funeral practices of Japan. Cf. Fabienne Duteil-Ogata, Nouvelles technologies et pratiques funéraires contemporaines, *Japon pluriel* 8, Arles, Philippe Picquier, 2011, p. 302-307. Cf. Fabienne Duteil-Ogata, *L'espace funéraire au Japon, un espace diversifié en pleine mutation: vers un nouveau lexique?*, 2007, 16 p. http://www.reseau-asie.com/cgibin/prog/pform.cgi?langue=fr&Mcenter=colloque&TypeListe=showdoc&email=&password=&ID_document=434.

the tomb boil down to a simple internet connection and only a virtual and memorial visit to the deceased.

5 Cyberstone: the online tomb

Cyberstone aims to be a continuation of the computer-tomb. In 2012 it only attracted a fistful of subscribers. The ashes of the deceased can be placed in one of the temple's many graves for everlasting worship, or deposited in another temple, or scattered out of doors (in the sea, in mountain, river...), (Rowe, M 2003). The online tomb is different from the other two in that it is neither materialized nor associated to a physical computer-tomb and only exists virtually on the web, even though the ashes are enshrined somewhere or scattered in nature.

Though Cyberstone denies any religious connotation, since no cult is performed either *in situ* or virtually, the thirty-three year contract recalls, as in the previous cases, the length of the Buddhist ancestralization process. Cyberstone (200,000 yens) is therefore an internet website. In that, it is reminiscent of many other tombs, imaginary[13] or real (Gamba, F 2007). By signing a contract, subscribers benefit from a personalized homepage as well as an access to the website with identifier and password. And if they agree to leave their homepage on free access, they get a better price.

What is the information that the subscriber can request the temple put on their website? They can ask the temple to create their presentation, including photograph and text. The memorial page can be enhanced by a musical background conducive to meditation. As an option, it is also possible to obtain a page with one's profile laid out in a scroll-down format with pictures and texts, and extra pages with one's biography. A page for the photo-album and others for sound or video are also available, and a page containing information about a place usually located on Google map. This place may be where the remains of the deceased are deposited, or where he/she resided, or any other place. As an example, the demonstration page of the monk who launched the Cyberstone can be consulted on its website.[14] Altogether, the option permits adding 100 megabytes, *i.e.* 10 pages of text in A4 format, 20 photographs, 10 minutes of recorded material or 5 minutes of video. Color and page design are left up to the subscriber who can choose what they like. For the time being, the only

13 I should mention the recently published novel by Henri Gé, *Après.com*, Éditions Velours, Paris, 2012. The author imagines a website that would be livelier than a tombstone, where the deceased could deposit his/her voice, photographs, a video and a message so that everyone's life might be available even after their death and leave concrete traces for those who remain behind.

14 http://www.cyber-stone.jp/HP/about.html consulted June 13, 2013.

homepage accessible on the website is the monk's; the other subscribers have not given free access to theirs.[15]

The religious component seems to have completely disappeared from the online tomb; it is merely a homepage on an internet website. As for the second computer-tomb, anything pertaining to Buddhist symbolism has evaporated from the digital sequences: no more posthumous Buddhist name, no more traditional funeral portrait, no more pictures of the lotus. What is more, no Buddhist ritual is performed by the monks in the temple. The ritual has been trimmed down to a simple internet connection and become a memorial visit to the deceased. Buddhism as an institution simply plays the part of IT-manager, or webmaster. Can one still call this religious practice? Is it not simply a memorial service in which only the recollection of the deceased and their informational memory are reactivated and commemorated?

Could one not hypothesize that the monk Matsushima Nyokai and the subscribers have been converted to the cult of the internet, as Philippe Breton has suggested in his analysis (Breton, P 2000)? In which case, they must share the same view of the world according to which truth lies in information, and immortality in technology. In other words, are we not confronted here by a new belief or utopia, where technology alone is capable of immortalizing human beings in the form of computerized data?

6 Conclusion

Each of the three tombs possesses their specific features. All three, however, place the individuality of the deceased and his/her feelings, rather than the family's, at the center of their system. Resting on more diversified supports such as texts, visuals and sound, the representation of the deceased is more artistic and detailed than on a traditional tomb. The text is not limited to obituary data, it also includes copies of the deceased's personal writings or messages from the family, which makes it more intimate and moving. It is both a true narrative, formatted by the temple's webmaster but at the same time created by the person when alive or, more often, by family members, applying an aesthetics that is obvious especially in the layout and choice of wallpaper on the screen. Similarly, the visuals (whether still or moving images) taken when the deceased was still of this world, allow one to cancel out his/her death and bring him/her to life for the visitors, creating a visual narrative, in particular thanks to the use of photo-souvenirs arranged as in a photo album. Video activates another of the five senses: the voice. Because it permits movement, videos represent the body of the

15 The persons I asked did not allow me to consult their homepage, even after I reiterated my request to the monk. Such a circumstance complicates things for the ethnologist in the field.

deceased as if it were still alive. Mediation *via* the internet also engenders a different way of relating to time and space. Its immediacy does away with the annual rituals and the calendar of post-mortem rites. The ritual association to time is no longer cyclical, based on ancestor worship passed on from generation to generation; it has become linear and horizontal.

Geographic distance is abolished, one relates to the deceased here and now. The religious components in the systems proposed *via* the internet seem meagre, for little by little, as new versions of the computer-tomb appear, Buddhist symbols disappear. The internet connection comes closer to a memorial service than to real ancestor worship. In fact, it boils down to celebrating what one remembers of the deceased, the recollection of him or her. Yet, for people who live near a temple and can actually go there, the internet does not totally eliminate offline funeral practices. Our interviews show that online cults get tacked on to offline cults, that a continuity between them exists.

It should also be recalled that in Japan, objects, like people, possess vital forces: the mortuary tablet (*ihai*), in which the deceased is symbolically lodged, usually placed in the Buddhist family altar (photo n° 2), is now carried around in one's belongings (photo n° 5), as part of the new practice of having handy funeral objects readily available and desiring greater proximity. It is as if the presence of the deceased, through the *ihai,* is no longer supposed to simply protect the family but rather the person who carries it, like a talisman or relic. Are the computer or cellular phone, when connected *via* the internet to the deceased's homepage, also receptacles for their living presence?

Lastly, let us return to the hypotheses put forth by the creator of this tomb: have they been confirmed? Have graves and cemeteries really become useless? Has the disappearance of DNA been replaced by the digital? One cannot ignore the fact that the users of these new virtual tombs continue to visit offline graves, especially during the rituals; visits to the burial place *in situ* seem to have kept their usefulness. Online practices thus are added on to offline practices, but have not replaced them. In an era of funeral services became without bones or DNA, marked by the end of individual identification, digital technology has in fact allowed compensating for the absence of individuality by recording individuals' memories and information. Thanks to the storage in a virtual place of sounds, visuals and texts, survivors can access these post-mortem digital identities via the internet. Nevertheless, accessing this personal information depends on the evolution of technology over time. To remain accessible and permanent from one generation to the next, digital data require to be constantly converted and adapted to new operating systems and new versions of software. If not, the digital data and their contents will only enlarge the website cemetery and webpages, left fallow, being neither tended nor supervised,[16] will truly end up as "dead pages" (Merzeau, L 2009).

16 Cf. http://egoblog.net/2008/11/08/cimetiere-20-chronique-de-tmf-sur-france-culture/ consulted March 13, 2014.

photo n° 1: Traditional Buddhist tomb, Kudoku Temple, Tôkyô, Japan, May 2012, photo: Fabienne Duteil-Ogata

photo n° 2: Buddhist family altar (butsudan): to the left, slightly higher than the rest, the deceased's mortuary tablet (ihai); below, placed on a small table, offerings to the ancestor: tea, cooked rice, and food. Tôkyô, April 2009, photo: Fabienne Duteil-Ogata

photo n° 3: Monthly Buddhist ritual performed July 3, 2011 in front of the first computer-tomb, Kudoku Temple, Tôkyô, photo: Fabienne Duteil-Ogata

photo n° 4: Second computer-tomb, Kudoku Temple, Tôkyô, July 2011, photo: Fabienne Duteil-Ogata

photo n° 5: Madame K. showing me her husband's portable mortuary tablet, Kudoku Temple, Tôkyô, May 2012, photo: Fabienne Duteil-Ogata

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Biography

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Virtuality as a Religious Category?

Continuity and Discontinuity Between Online and Offline Catholic Monasteries

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Translation: Gabrielle Varro

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.

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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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At the Helm of the Number One French-language Protestant Network, *Jesus.net*

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Abstract

The history of the site *TopChrétien* is that of a "success story". This pioneer website was set up in 1999; its purpose is evangelism on the sixth continent: Internet. It was able to build a large audience and today it presents itself as the first Christian French-speaking portal. Since its inception, the site has continued to grow, to expand, to explore all the possibilities offered by new technologies, so that it now offers through all its applications a global religious culture ; it grew into a larger network, called *Jesus.net*, which proposes online guidance and counseling, online religious practices and sacred spaces.
Believers in Protestantism are not subjected to any hierarchical control: the role of self-proclaimed charismatic leaders should be emphasized, and initiatives are teeming in a virtual world where deregulation and decompartmentalization are facilitated. This contribution proposes to present this successful network built outside the ecclesial structures. Based on interviews and surveys of stakeholders, our study analyzes the vision and strategy developed by the founder (pastor of a Pentecostal church) and his entourage.
The initial idea of the website was substantially amended: the site was basically simple and non-specialized (an internet directory of Christian sites); but the dynamic created by the explosive growth of the Internet led creators of *TopChrétien* to develop a new vision: by pooling their individual and collective experience, they will be able to innovate to adapt the use of the Internet to the religious question.

Keywords

Protestantism; Evangelical; French-language network; Internet; Religion; virtual church; open-source evangelisation

1 Introduction

If it were not a matter of religion, there would certainly be much talk about the success story of the site *TopChrétien.com*, which had the honour of having a television programme devoted to it in June 2007[1]; this resulted in an influx of 1,220 surfers onto the server and the dispatching of 200 forms with questions or comments, such as this one by Blandine from Lyon: “I have just heard of you through the programme *66 Minutes* on the M6 channel. I want to be connected to this spiritual warmth!”[2].

While this Protestant site is, of course, far from being the only one to have resolutely set off down the path of technological modernity (Kirschleger 2011), several aspects set *TopChrétien* apart: first of all, it is a pioneer site, created as long ago as 1999; secondly, it is a “federating site for enthusiastic French-speaking Christians”, to cite the university academic and Protestant convert, François Bernot. It is run by a committed team of Christians who see themselves as missionaries on the sixth continent – the Internet (Bernot 2006). It has succeeded in building a large audience and today describes itself as the number one French-language Christian portal. Lastly, it is a site which has never ceased to evolve, enrich its services and explore all the possibilities that the new technologies[3] have opened up; thanks to all the applications it offers, it has come to constitute a global religious and cultural world and has grown into wider network called *Jesus.net*, offering all-round cyber-ministry and spaces for religious practices.

In a Protestant context, where religious authority is not subject to any hierarchical regulation and where initiatives by charismatic leaders abound, and in a virtual world that facilitates decompartmentalisation and transversality, this article sets out to present (see Barats 2013; Bourdon & Schafer 2012.) this successful network that has been built outside of any ecclesiastical structures. While for the creators of *TopChrétien*, the initial idea behind the site was simple and general, the rapid rise of the Internet led them, tentatively and experimentally, to develop a new vision, the principal challenge of which is to adapt use of the Internet for religious purposes.

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1 Even back 2005, Sébastien Fath highlighted the “remarkable success” of *TopChrétien* as proof of the social media activism of the evangelical Protestants (Fath 2005). Similarly, in his book *Dieu et Internet* (2011), the journalist Jean-Baptiste Maillard presents, *TopChrétien* as “the spearhead of evangelisation via the Internet”. The last item in *TopChrétien*’s credo states: “We believe in the legitimacy of using all modern means of communication to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ all over the world.”

2 *En direct du Top*, September 2007, p. 4.

3 In the light of this very great capacity for innovation and change, we should point out that the cut-off point for our study was February 2013.

2 Founder's intuition

In the beginning was the founder, the Pentecostalist minister, Éric Célérier. Born in 1964 in Toulouse, Éric Célérier grew up in a Christian family which gave both him and his brother a religious upbringing; he was confirmed, then turned away from religion, while his parents divorced. According to his memoirs[4], Célérier was a teenage rebel, heavily into alcohol, parties, drugs and Tibetan philosophy. Then, under the influence of his mother, who had begun attending an Evangelical church in Pontoise, and of members of that church, Célérier converted: at the age of 18 he became a "Christian" and chair-stacker for his church. He was in search of a vocation, spending three years at a chef school and a period at the Toulouse Faculty of Computing. After his military service, he was offered the chance to join the team organising Billy Graham's evangelisation campaign in France in 1986: "I've no idea who Billy Graham is," he replied, "but I accept with joy." This was Célérier's first salary, but first and foremost an experience that gave his life a direction: Graham's crusade was certainly a spectacular event, but one which had a substantial impact on thousands of lives (Baubérot 1988; Fath 2002.). Célérier then took up a course of study at the *École Biblique* and became a Pentecostalist minister in the Assemblies of God.

In 1997, he was given the mission of setting up a church near Lyon, at Givors. He decided to create a simple Internet site to present his church. His first contact was with a Brazilian who was studying Spanish and looking for Christians who could offer him a place to stay in Europe: it was then that Célérier realised the full potential of the Internet. The following year, he set up an evangelising site in collaboration with *Réalités de la foi* magazine[5].On the advice of a Pentecostalist minister friend, Fabien Créteur, who was encouraging him to create a Christian portal on the Internet, Célérier contacted Estelle Martin, a qualified statistician, a doctor of mathematics at École polytechnique de Lausanne, and director of Mégaphone, a sound-equipment company based in French-speaking Switzerland founded by her husband, which had been building up its Internet department since 1996. This is how, in July 1999, TopChrétien was launched. At the outset, the idea was to build a directory and a kind of ranking of Christian sites: the name was initially intended to be *Hit-parade francophone* ("French-speaking hit parade"), but this was abandoned for the more self-explanatory *TopChrétien francophone*, that is the top Protestant and Evangelical sites. For Estelle Martin, the idea of ranking sites lacked interest in itself, but was a good way of promoting quality: *TopChrétien* therefore gave advice to webmasters on how to improve their sites and get

4 This kind of tale is by no means unique among religious leaders.

5 *Réalités de la Foi-Digest*: for a quarter of a century this magazine, founded in 1965 by Erwin Buchmann, offered a selection of the best articles from the press and literature devoted to the Christian faith. Taken over by Alliance Presse in the early 2000s, the magazine did not succeed in gaining a new lease of life. Publication ended at the end of 2008.

themselves known.[6] The site was hosted free of charge by Mégaphone, at www.megaphone.ch/top, after which an address was created for the portal: www.topchretien.com. From 1999 to the present, *TopChrétien* has never ceased to develop: designed as a portal to help Christians find their way around the gigantic maze of the World Wide Web, *TopChrétien* has become a veritable missionary and evangelising tool specially designed for the Internet.

3 Supports

To achieve what he set out to do, and especially to allow information to be added to the site and be updated, Célérier needed a team and a structure for managing the portal: a non-profit association was created under the French 1901 associations act and declared to the Loire prefecture in November 2000 – *Top Chrétien Francophone*, the purpose of which is "to bring French-speaking Christians closer through the Internet". Following Éric Célérier's move in 2004, the association was transferred to Seine-et-Marne and offices were rented in Ozoir-la-Ferrière. The *Amis suisses du Top Chrétien francophone* association was created in Switzerland in January 2005: this centralises donations from Switzerland and uses them to fund the IT servers and maintenance. At the end of 2009, for example, virtually all its resources were used to purchase a new server: since then *TopChrétien* has had two dedicated servers at Mégaphone, hosting all the sites belonging to the network.

A new structure was created in 2006 – the *Top Mission* association, which is registered Strasbourg and manages the permanent staff: this "association under local law" (under an act of 1908) is recognised as being in the public interest, which entitles donors to tax reductions, thus providing an incentive to donate[7].

In 2009, the two French associations merged, keeping only the more advantageous of the two, *Top Mission*. This is managed by a Board of Administrators, which is elected by the General Meeting and has five members, two of whom are employed; it is assisted by a "council of elders", called the Governance Council and made up of 10 ministers, well-known names on the French or African Pentecostalist and Evangelical scene[8].

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6 Interview with Estelle Martin, by Jean Hassenforder and Françoise Rontard, November 2002 (www.temoins.com).

7 This status entitles donors to a tax reduction on 66 % of donated sums. Moreover, *Top Mission* is approved by the *Fondation du Protestantisme*, an organisation which is recognised as being in the public interest, which entitles donors subject to the wealth tax (*impôt sur la fortune*) to a 75% tax reduction.

8 The Board of Administrators is made up of Nathalie Texier (president), Gérald Branum (vice-president), Bénédicte Girard (treasurer), Éric Célérier (visionary and founder) and Michael Foucault (secretary). The Governance Council is made up of ministers Michel Balverde (CIJEM, Clamart Evangelical Church), Yvan Castanou (Christian Impact Centre), Ronan Jezequel (Chalon-sur-Saône Evangelical Church), Mamadou Karambiri (Centre International

The development of *TopChrétien* soon exceeded the bounds of a simple association, which is not allowed to make a profit: in December 2003, it became necessary to create a limited liability company– SARL *Trilogie Concept* [9], a programming company – to manage the profit-making business.

4 Economic model

All the services offered by the *TopChrétien* mission are free, all costs being covered by the mission. There are three pillars underpinning *TopChrétien*'s operating activities: the association, which manages the volunteers; the team of permanent staff, called missionaries; and its commercial business.

For a long time run solely by volunteers, *TopChrétien* recruited its first employee in 2003. A team of permanent staff was gradually built up to reach a maximum of seventeen in 2008-2009, which subsequently fell back to fourteen, two of these in Africa.

Volunteers thus play as crucial and major a role today as they did at the beginning. The *TopChrétien* portal is nurtured by the work of numerous volunteers, evaluated at eight or nine-tenths of a full-time post; prospecting for donations takes the equivalent of two full-time posts: it needs to be underlined, of course, that the association lives almost exclusively on donations[10]. Thanks to its energy, it has succeeded since 2009 in creating a fairly sound financial basis for itself, with more than 1.2 million euros of donations per year, which enabled it to purchase the *TopChrétien* offices in 2010.

For a number of years, the financial spin-off from the sales projects of SARL *Trilogie Concept* made it possible to cover some of the overheads (office rental, the salaries of six of the permanent staff, running costs), although there has been a change of strategy since 2010, when the company was incorporated into a Dutch business undertaking called NEEMA[11].

d'évangélisation-Mission intérieure africaine, Burkina Faso), Mark Ost (Centre Foi, Espérance et Amour, Protestant Evangelical Church), Francis Pfister (Apostolic Church), Jean-Pierre Riche (vice-president of FEPEF), Samuel Rodrigues (Montreuil Protestant Evangelical Church), Mohammed Sanogo (Vase d'honneur Church, Côte d'Ivoire), and Jean Mallet (formerly of Toulon Reformed Church).

9 *Trilogie Concept* funds design and distribution projects for multimedia tools (CD cards, DVD, *TopBoutique*, etc.).

10 The campaigns for donations for *TopChrétien* are held once a year (usually at the end of the year) and last one month. On the *TopChrétien* site they take the form of a banner at the top of every page: users of the site and anyone who uses the different services offered by *TopChrétien* are invited to take part.

11 We do not know the exact reasons for this change in strategy, but we have noticed a decrease in the business of the SARL in proportion to the growth of the Top Mission association.

The most delicate problem seems to be that of how to fund the team of paid staff: in 2011, the association *Top Mission* paid only nine of the fourteen permanent members of staff, including the two leaders. This means that the permanent staff have to seek financial support from external partners, notably the association Agapé France[12] or American missions.

5 Vision and tools

The team of permanent staff and volunteers serve the founder's vision, which has developed considerably. The initial idea was to bring Christians together, a conviction that Célérier acquired during Billy Graham's crusade: "With *TopChrétien* of which I am the head," he stated, "I seek unity between all the denominations, it is not a good thing to work solely for your own chapel, parish or church." [13]

TopChrétien is first and foremost a portal with a directory and search engine: the sites are listed and ranked by number of visitors, number of likes and number of votes, or by subject. There are four main subjects: mankind, faith, communication and general sites. Thanks to it, visitors had access to more than 800 Christian sites in 2001, 2,000 sites in 2005, and 4,400 sites in 2010.

But "bringing together" is not an end in itself: Célérier wishes to use the Internet as a means of encouraging Christians; the idea is to offer Web surfers free access to resources every day to encourage them to let their spiritual life grow. This is why *TopChrétien* develops numerous free services: "thought of the day"[14], virtual greetings cards, services to help the webmasters of Christian sites, all designed for adults, but also for children, such as the letter for 7-13 year-olds called *TopKids*.

However, while it is Christians' duty to try to attain God's holiness, their duty also lies in being present in the world, to accomplish their obligation of being Christ's missionary: from encouragement to evangelisation, *TopChrétien* pursues the same goal, offering Web surfers searching for spirituality or asking themselves existential questions the Good News of Jesus Christ in response to the needs of their soul. Serving the goal of evangelisation, *TopChrétien* created a third section, entitled "Questions of faith", on its portal at an early stage. It exploits all the

12 A missionary association founded in France in 1972, emanating from the American evangelical organisation, *Campus Crusade for Christ*, created in 1951 by Bill Bright: initially aimed at evangelising students, it has since expanded its activities to include young athletes, musicians, families and minorities.

13 Interview with Éric Célérier by John K. Kamga at SEBILIC (Bible and Christian Book Week) in Cameroon in 2003.

14 As an indication of the quality of this "Thought of the Day", the Catholic Jean-Louis Pascal Ballif cites it three times in the bibliography of his work *De l'eau vive pour tous les hommes. L'eau vive, symbole de la Parole de Dieu*, Publibook, Paris, 2010.

possibilities that the Internet offers: reading, of course (the Bible online, Word of the Day, frequently asked biblical questions), watching (short videos or flash animations, screensavers and desk tops, and even the Wall of Lamentations live[15]), listening (audio messages, Christian radio stations, Christian mp3 music), and lastly, dialoguing (a discussion salon and forum where people can share their faith; a chat room for teenagers; and over twenty Christians, called "Philippe online", who bear witness and reply to visitors' questions).

Pursuing the same idea, the *TopChrétien* team developed video and computer products: DVDs, such as the film *L'Espoir*[16] in 2005, CD-cards (*Toute la Bible sur une carte de visite* – "The Whole Bible on a Calling Card" – in 2003, *Le sens de la Croix* – "The Meaning of the Cross" – produced in 2004 on the release of the film *The Passion of the Christ*). 100,000 of these CD cards were distributed at the Athens Olympic Games in 2004, for example. But that was venturing outside the bounds of the Internet: the experiment was not repeated and the *TopChrétien* team returned its focus to the Internet.

The structure of the portal underwent its first strategic change in 2002: services took precedence over the sites and gained substance, with *TopInfo*, which provides news on Christian topics worldwide, *TopLeader* for Church leaders, small ads, *TopDétente* for online gaming; in 2003 *TopPrière* for prayer subjects, *TopAction* for humanitarian projects; in 2004 *TopBoutique, TopFéminin* and *TopÉvénements*, in 2006 *TopMessages*, while other services disappeared or underwent transformation. The services offered by *TopChrétien* are continuously evolving.

In April 2005, the evangelical aspect was stepped up: the *devenir chrétien* ("becoming a Christian") page became a site in its own right, *ConnaîtreDieu.com*. In April 2006, the *Évangile* ("Gospel") section took precedence over the sites section. In July 2008, the portal underwent a revolution: a new version of the site, a new design and first and foremost a new structure, still with three sections but redefined – with *TopMax,* which contains all the resources available on *TopChrétien* (texts, audios, videos)[17], in blue; *TopActu,* i.e. news, events and sites[18] in red; and *TopContact*, the social networking site set up by *TopChrétien*, in orange: from their personal account, profile or internal messaging service, members are able to communicate and share information[19]. In December 2011, the three sections were renamed for greater clarity (*Connectés à l'essentiel, Connectés pour agir, Connectés ensemble* – "Connected to the essential", "Connected to

15 The evangelical Protestants consider the history of the Bible as their history, and the land of the Bible as a kind of adopted homeland. But Israel is not only the place where Christ did his ministry and was crucified: the Holy Land is also the focal point of prophecies announcing Christ's second coming.

16 *L'Espoir. Le tour de la Bible en 80 minutes*, 2005, published by Trilogie Concept.

17 *Pensée du Jour; Top TV; Top Messages; Top Famille; Top Féminin; Top Bible; Top Kids; TopAdos; Top Témoignages*.

18 *Top Info; Top Evénements; Les Sites; Top Radio; Top Humanitaire*.

19 *Espace personnel; Les Membres; Groupes; Top Cartes; Top Annonces; Top Prière; Joy In Heaven*.

act", "Connected together"). In doing so, *TopChrétien* created a common, central space (Beaude 2012).

But these changes in presentation are first and foremost an indication of a more fundamental revolution, with a threefold hallmark: *TopChrétien* definitively abandoned its initial idea, that of being a directory of sites; *TopChrétien* moved into the interactive age and adopted the "online religion" model, to use the now classic definition coined by Christopher Helland[20]; lastly, *TopChrétien* opened up a new phase in its development with the creation of the *Jesus.net* network. Launched in autumn 2009 by Éric Célérier and his friend and supporter Jan-Willem Bosman, media director at Agapé Netherlands, the *Jesus.net* project is an additional extension of the missionary aspect: from the conceptual point of view, the idea was to make a smoother transition between the virtual and physical worlds – both to connect Christians online and to facilitate connection offline; geographically, the idea was to move outside the French-speaking world to roll out a global evangelisation project via the Internet and to achieve this, *Jesus.net* was designed as an open-source evangelisation network.

The general structure was thus redesigned and is now made up of several levels following the "stepping stone" strategy. The *Jesus.net* page acts as a home page for Web surfers who do a search on Google: the aim is to position the site on the modern market for all things religious where people idly wander[21].

The first stone, *ConnaîtreDieu.com*, is an offer to discover God on an interactive journey. After the testimonials, the Internet user enters into a dialogue with God thanks to an animation consisting of an effective mix of graphics and sound and is invited to pray – since, according to Evangelical Christians, prayer and personal experimentation are the foundation stone of the Christian life. Clicking means praying sincerely to receive Jesus as their Lord – that is the first stage in the conversion and on *TopChrétien,* one can follow prayer "decisions" on a map in real time: here, to set the example is to bear witness – modern technology is a good means of pursuing "God's work".

Internet users who discover Jesus are then invited to grow with Jesus. The new online "converts" can join a virtual church, *monEglise.net*. When it was launched, the site offered six direct links a day, introduced by a presenter, to a church service or a time of worship with a virtual community; however, since it cost too much to record services in a studio and audience figures were

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20 Back in 1999, Christopher Helland at Dalhousie University (Halifax, Canada) made the following suggestion: to distinguish between "religious websites where people could act with unrestricted freedom and a high level of interactivity (*online religion*) versus the majority of religious websites, which seemed to provide only religious information and not interaction (*religion online*)" (Helland 2000).

21 "In a context where the consumer is being increasingly solicited to make a choice, offers of to provide meaning, just like any other, have to adapt in order to maintain or increase their market share" writes Sébastien Fath (2005b).

low[22], the site now offers church services broadcast directly from several churches on Sunday, and during the week two programmes that are repeated non-stop every two hours. To counter the idea of an impersonal Internet entity[23], the aim of the designers of *monEglise.net* was to create a communion of fraternal users: members' pseudos (M Martin 2012) and photos are displayed and participants can chat; visitors join an emotion-based community, a community of prayer and song, a community quite purely and simply (Lodombé 2012) – at the risk of disturbing certain users: “I find that the discussion salon on *monEglise.net* is more like MSN Facebook than a Bible discussion group”, commented Yvonne, for example, shortly after the launch[24].

Forestalling criticism, the designers explain that it is neither a “virtual church” nor a substitute for the local church: *monEglise.net* is a space for people belonging to no community who discover faith and what a Church is; a transitional church where people are encouraged to join a local church near to their home.

Of course, *TopChrétien* remains the principal stepping stone, the backbone of the organisation for French speakers with its Christian content, Christian music and Christian training courses.

The next stepping stone is for Internet users who want to bear witness to their faith: sure of salvation, converts can, in their turn, set out to conquer the world thanks to the widget *Jesus.net*. The vocation of this tool is to help any Christian site, whether individually or church-owned, to become a point of easy access to the Gospel. Internet users can then invite their friends to the *Jesus.net* pages on the social networks: *Jesus.net* is a “Church Facebook” in its own way.

Lastly, there is a search engine called *ChristianGo.com*. The aim is now to offer a place for sharing and fraternal communion in the shape of an inter-denominational French-speaking community centred on Jesus. But the aim is also to associate religion at home and religion in a community, to offer searching Internet users a point of connection with local communities so that they can meet Christians in the flesh and become disciples of Jesus: *Jesus.net* is designed to be a global tool with local impact.

If Internet users have questions during their journey through *ConnaîtreDieu.com*, more than 300 selected online counsellors are there to follow them up[25]. If Internet users click on a prayer, a

22 Boris Beaude’s analyses (2012) give reason to believe that the Internet is less a space for synchronisation (a process that consists of providing a common tempo) than a space for “synchorisation” (a process that consists of providing a common space for being and doing).

23 Isabelle Jonveaux emphasises this risk in her study entitled “Une retraite de carême sur internet” (2007).

24 A comment posted on the *TopChrétien* site, 6 January 2010.

25 “14% of people visiting the site tell us that they have said the prayer to receive Jesus as their saviour, and 5% have left us their details (last name, first name, email, etc.) for a follow-up by one of our 800 counsellors” (*En direct du Top*, *TopChrétien* newsletter, January 2008).

list of partner churches or the list of Alpha courses[26] close to them is displayed; they can also get a Bible free of charge. If Internet users leave their details, *TopChrétien* passes them on to a partner Church: the partner Church undertakes to get in contact with users, respond very rapidly to their emails and to provide the same follow up as they would for anyone who came to church for the first time (phone calls, visits, invitations to attend church, etc.). As a partner, the local Church enables the Internet to leave the virtual sphere. *TopChrétien* has 269 local partner churches[27] in mainland France, and these have to belong to the National Council of Evangelicals in France (CNEF) or an evangelical denomination of the French Protestant Federation.

Outside the French-speaking world, *Jesus.net* groups more than 40 partner Christian organisations. The most innovative have made their initiatives available to the others: the French *ConnaîtreDieu.com*, the Dutch *WhyJesus?* course[28], the Swiss *MyStory*[29] – which are gradually being translated into all languages: *ConnaîtreDieu.com* is available in 20 languages[30], sometimes in several versions (4 sites in German, 4 sites Spanish, 3 sites in English, 2 sites in Portuguese) – the objective being ultimately to be available in all 35 of the major languages used on the Internet. On the Internet, we are seeing what the sociologists of religion have shown in the physical world: the globalisation of movements thanks to the creation of worldwide networks, the concrete manifestation of which, in this case, are two annual conferences, the *Global Christian Internet Alliance,* created in 2001, and the *Jesus.net* conference, created in 2009[31].

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26 Created in an Anglican parish in the centre of London in the late 1970s, the Alpha courses are meals where people can talk to one another about God and the meaning of life. In one series of meals, the Alpha course aims to provide an opportunity to discover (or rediscover) the foundations of the Christian faith in a church in its neighbourhood in a friendly and informal atmosphere. Cf. La Barbe 2007.

27 *En direct du Top*, April 2012.

28 *WhyJesus ?* is an interactive online course for people with questions about life, religion and belief: it attempts to build a bridge between askers on the Internet and offline communities (churches or Alpha courses). It is a five-week course about the bases of the Christian faith, which gives participants the possibility of interacting with one another.

29 *MyStory* gives Christians a chance to recount their personal story with Jesus: “Your personal experience with Jesus is important and perhaps crucial for the people that you meet in your everyday life,” the site explains. Perhaps their personal story has some resemblance to yours…”.

30 The site was launched in Dutch back in 2005 (*IkzoekGod.nl*), in Chinese (*RenshiShen.com*), in German (*GottKennen.com*) and English (*LookingforGod.com*) in 2006, in Arabic in 2007 (*MaarifatAllah.com*), in Spanish (*EnbuscadeDios.com*), in Russian (*PoiskBoga.com*), Italian (*ConoscereDio.com*), Portuguese (*ConhecerDeus.com*) and Turkish (*Allahitanimak.com*) in 2008, etc.

31 The *TopChrétien* team has been a part of the GCIA (Global Christian Internet Alliance, launched in 2001 in Chicago) since 2002, thereby building contacts with some twenty heads of major portals in other countries, such as the United States, Germany and Chile. The *Jesus.net* conferences were held in 2009 and 2010 in Paris, in 2011 in Rotterdam, and in 2012 in the United States in the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association centre.

6 Conclusion

The momentum of the Evangelical and, above all, Pentecostalist movements is legitimised by their duty to be effective; consequently, *TopChrétien* is continuously evolving and forever experimenting[32]: from its initial idea, which was to raise the profile of Christian sites by means of a directory and, through that, facilitate contacts between Christians, the site has developed an innovative strategy that grew from simply being religion over the Internet to cyber-religion. *TopChrétien* views itself as an avant-garde platform for evangelisation: “The world is evolving and new technologies are available,” explains Éric Célérier. “It is our duty as Christians to see how we can use the new technologies to comply with Jesus’ great command, which is to go into all the world and preach the good news.”

The originality of *TopChrétien* is certainly to have designed both an all-encompassing strategy and a strategy of proximity with local churches; thanks to the different Internet tools it offers, it is easier to have “access to the Gospel” and grow in faith; thanks to the partnerships that have been formed with a certain number of churches and associations, there is an effort to create physical links with the Internet users. The individual and the individual’s spiritual edifice are indeed at the centre of the *Jesus.net* project.

This explains why today, *Topchrétien* describes itself as the number one Christian portal for the French-speaking world, with one million visits a month[33]. *TopChrétien*’s social network has over 115,000 members. As for the Facebook indicators, they reveal 19,000 fans of *Topchrétien*, 11,000 fans of *ConnaîtreDieu.com*, and 286,000 fans of the *Jesus.net* network.

These figures say nothing about the origins of the members, as the Internet has transformed the very notion of space: on the Web, geographical distance has no meaning; ignoring national borders, *TopChrétien* recruits from the entire French-speaking world, its members residing – in decreasing order – in France (47,953), Côte d’Ivoire (10,120), Canada (7.553), Belgium (4,489), Cameroon (4,362), Switzerland (3,207), the Congo (3,147), etc[34].

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32 In February 2012, *Jesus.net* won the *RNB International Innovation Award*, awarded by National Religious Broadcasters at its annual convention.

33 According to figures supplied by *TopChrétien*, the site posted: 101,000 visits in 2000; 575,000 visits in 2001; 1,587,000 visits in 2002 and… 7 million visits in 2006; 35 million visits from 1999 to 2007; 60 million visits in ten years.

34 In her article ‘Une congrégation pentecôtiste congolaise à Montréal’ (2008), Géraldine Mossière pointed out that “the minister was proud to have his community referenced on the French-speaking site *Top Chrétien* where he makes his sermons publicly available and thanks to which he says that he corresponds with French-speaking Pentecostalists all over the world”.

As for *monEglise.net*, it does not appear to have met with the anticipated success[35], even if the visitor figures are far from negligible: 3,000 Internet users on Sundays, an average 500 on weekdays, and in its first year, 2,000 people who wished to join one of the partner Churches.

The overall success enjoyed by *TopChrétien* has attracted some criticism. In an article posted on 1 January 2013 on the site *Actu-Chrétienne.net*, an evangelical webzine, Samuel Foucart, a Pentecostalist minister who formerly worked on *TopChrétien*, reproached the latter for enjoying "a greatly overvalued aura": "This start-up, aimed at evangelising the world," he wrote, "now does next to no evangelising but continues to maintain the illusion of doing so, while receiving the dividends reserved for the missionaries." Without going into the details here of a controversy in which much has been left unspoken, let us simply note the tensions that have grown up as a result. To criticism of the emphasis placed by the site on the highly controversial prosperity theology[36], *TopChrétien* responded by giving less publicity to its "scores"[37]; to this renewed criticism of its expenditure, *TopChrétien* responded by greater transparency, publishing all its reports and accounts online.

In an evangelical world where debate is traditionally carried on without any mincing of words, on the Internet, through blogs and the digital media this same culture is finding a new form of expression, perhaps ensuring a new form of regulation suited to the era of new technology.

35 Several comments posted on the site by Internet users show how difficult it is to satisfy audiences: some preferred "the old presentation", now find the message "too short", or suggest finding a "presentation between the two [versions]".

36 "Prosperity theology" or the "prosperity Gospel", emerged in certain American Pentecostalist milieus during the 1960s: placing Christian salvation and material wealth on the same level, it promises believers health, wealth and freedom from demonic influences on the premises that a "child of God" should not be poor or suffer. In a text adopted in 2012, the National Council of Evangelists of France (CNEF) denounced "the practices of certain parties who use this theology to exploit those weaker than themselves and to instil guilt in Christians who, despite authentic faith, remain ill in accordance with God's will".

37 On 13 January 2009, for example, one million decisions in favour of Jesus were announced on *ConnaîtreDieu.com*. This kind of sensationalist announcement no longer appears.

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Biography

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Gaia, God, and the Internet – Revisited

The History of Evolution and the Utopia of Community in Media Society[1]

Oliver Krüger

Abstract

The question of religious content in the media has occupied many scholars studying the relationship between media and religion. However, the study of recent religious thought offers a promising perspective for the analysis of the cultural perceptions of various media technologies. After the Internet spread in the middle of the 1990s, a variety of religious or spiritual interpretations of the new medium emerged. The far-reaching ideas see the Internet as the first step of the realisation of a divine entity consisting of the collective human mind. In this vision, the emergence of the Internet is considered to be part of a teleological evolutionary model. Essential for the religious and evolutionary construction of the Internet is an incorporation of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's model of evolution – especially the idea of the noosphere, and its adoption in media theory by Marshall McLuhan. The connections of these ideas to James Lovelock's Gaia theory illustrate the notion of the Internet as an organic entity. The article outlines the processes of the reception of religious and evolutionary ideas which led to the recent interpretations of the Internet as a divine sphere.

Keywords

Internet, noosphere, gaia, Marshall McLuhan, Teilhard de Chardin, James Lovelock

1 The original article was published in *Numen – International Review for the History of Religion* 54 (2/2007), p. 138-173.

1 Media theory and the study of religion

Religion played a certain role early media theory when the Toronto School of Communication was established. Media as crucial instruments of the human perception of the world were not seen as objective means for observation or communication, but, according to Marshall McLuhan and Harold Innis, they contain within themselves the conditions of a certain perception of reality. Elisabeth Eisenstein in *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1979) and McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962) demonstrated the impact of the printing press on the emergence of humanism, reformation, and democracy:

> Print is the extreme phase of alphabetic culture that detribalizes and decollectivizes man in the first instance. Print raises the visual features of alphabet to highest intensity of definition. Thus print carries the individuating power of the phonetic alphabet much further than manuscript culture could ever do. Print is the technology of individualism. (McLuhan 2002, 158)

Although these strong claims could be challenged by pointing to divergent uses of the printing press in early modern Europe (hard censorship in Catholic countries, liberal policies in the Netherlands, etc.) this approach gained much attention placing media (and media theory) in the center of analysis of social and cultural change. Here, media were not seen as *objective* means for observation or communication in the hands of autonomous human agents, but they contained within themselves the conditions of a certain perception of reality, and of a certain construction of reality (Innis 1951; McLuhan 1994, Meyrowitz 1985). This early approach, mainly influenced by research on propaganda, dealt with the question of the manipulation of the media consumer – the basic question of media effects: "What are the media doing with their consumers?"

A decade ago media scientist Lynn Schofield Clark for example paradigmatically considered the phenomenon of religion on the Internet as *protestantization* since on the Internet the original protestant values like liberty, pluralism and democracy could now be realized (Schofield Clark 2002:7; Helland 2005:13). Currently, the theory of mediatization of religion and culture in late modern societies initiated by Stig Hjavard postulates fundamental changes of mediatized religion:

> "By the mediatization of society, we understand the process whereby society to an increasing degree is submitted to, or becomes dependent on, the media and their logic" (Hjavard 2008a, 113).

According to Hjavard, media have taken over ritual elements and social functions of religion (Hjavard 2008b:10–13, 18–20; 2013: 84–101). However, the empirical translation of 'the logic of the media' remains diffuse, and surprisingly Hjavard's own analyses of popular movies (*Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*) show only marginal influence of these movies on the viewers' "spiritual

interest" (Hjarvard 2008b: 19–23). This strong mediatization thesis proposed by Hjavard and other scholars lacks an historical and intercultural perspective and is mainly based on the situation in Scandinavian churches (Hjavard 2013; Hjavard/Lövheim 2012). In contrast to Hjavard, Andreas Hepp and Friedrich Krotz point out that mediatization has to be understood as a relational concept, covering the complex dynamics between media, communication, and culture. They analyze the social, spatial, and temporal consequences of new media (Hepp/Krotz 2012, 11).

The sociological tradition in media research pointed early on to the other side of the coin: e.g., " … the question (is) not ‚what do the media do to people?' but, rather, ‚What do people do with the media'" (Katz/Foulkes 1962, 378; Schmidt 2000:76-84). This implies rejecting claims that a certain medium has a determined effect on society or 'religion,' searching rather for different modes of use and reception among social groups (age, gender, education, cultural/religious background), taking into account historical dynamics. Here, media research figures as social science (Ayaß 2012; Keppler 2005; Krüger 2012, 21-31), and it benefits from innovative approaches in media anthropology, which covers media use in the context of social, ritual and corporal practices (Meyer 2009; 2012).

2 The religious reception of media technology

For the study of religion, as well as cultural studies, not only is the question of media content pivotal, but so is the issue of the cultural embedment of a medium in general in attempts to understand the valuation of specific media content by particular groups of recipients. Thus, the history of religion is based exclusively on media artifacts and contemporary research can hardly ignore them. In addition, nearly all religious traditions have developed 'theories' regarding these media artifacts. From a religious perspective the existence of media touches upon epistemological questions of authenticity and truth regarding the mainly visual and auditory experience that media make possible, e.g. the 'true' image and word of god. Media technology is always embedded in certain cultural and social patterns of reception. Media are – apart from their contents – received differently in diverse social, cultural, historical, and religious settings. Media theorist Heidi Campbell is convinced that those religious communities which are basically critical towards technology, must undergo a process of *spiritualisation* of a new media technology – in other words, the assumed secular media technology first has to be contextualized in a religious pattern of interpretation, upon which it becomes usable in accordance with religious purposes and dogma (Campbell 2005:1-8; Campbell 2010, 1–7).

Previous research has focused especially on how mostly homogenous religious groups are dealing with electronic media, particularly when there is a conflict between the use of new technology and religious values. Thus, studies have analyzed such social phenomena as the “domestification” of the telephone by the Amish in the United States, and, more recently, the introduction of the Internet in ultra-orthodox Jewish groups in Israel (Zimmerman-Umble 1992; Barzilai/Barzilai-Nahon 2005).

3 The myths of the Internet

In comparison with research on these apparently homogenous religious communities it is a far more complex undertaking to trace dominant patterns of interpretation which hardly can be attributed to a certain religious or social milieu. Burkhard Gladigow addressed in 2000 both aspects of this issue in his notion of the *iconic turn*: on the one hand is the question of “God in cyberspace” (Gladigow 2005a:287), demonstrated by the presentation of religious content on the Internet, and on the other hand is the question of the „new mythologies“ of the medium Internet itself:

> „Es ist auffallend, wie schnell die Internet-Besucher, unabhängig von den Selbstdarstellungen bestimmter religiöser Gruppierungen, das gesamte Netz, Simulation, Virtualität und ständige Metamorphosen, mit religiösen oder göttlichen Prädikaten bedacht haben” (Gladigow 2005a:288).

These multi-faceted research agendas might accentuate partly religious, and partly secular aspects. This article tries to illuminate the diffuse network of the cultural reception of the medium Internet as part of a larger discourse on religion and media philosophy. The expression “diffuse” (from Latin *diffusus*) is understood in the sense of amalgamation, vagueness and reciprocal pervasion of the religious, social, political, economic, philosophical and technological factors of this discourse field (Bühl 1997).

The most far-reaching interpretations of the Internet are characterized by claiming relevance not only for certain types of societies (e.g. post-industrial societies) or specific applications (e.g. education), but for the evolution and general history of humankind or even for the cosmological history of the universe. Ontological patterns of interpretation include to a greater or lesser extent metaphysical assumptions on the nature of the Internet and the common notion of virtual reality. Most prominently and frequently cited is Michael Heim, who introduced the notion of the *metaphysics of cyberspace* in 1993[2] – the neologisms “cyberplatonism” (List 1996), “cybergnosis”

2 Heim did not write much on the metaphysics of cyberspace – the only relevant passage is an associative *staccato* of metaphors, reaching from the Holy Grail and King Arthur up to Wagner’s Parsifal. By these ideas, initiated by the

(Böhme 1996) and “techgnosis” (Davis 1998) reflect the creative reception of this concept in post-modern media philosophy that primarily focuses on overcoming the human body by means of “virtual technologies”.[3]

Apart from these assumptions there is an evolutionary discourse, which is not limited to a Gnostic-philosophical interpretation of today’s media technology but which promises the dawn of a new age with the prophecy of an actual transformation of humankind. Here, it is noteworthy that a religious interpretation of the history of evolution and an organic / holistic view of the planet earth (*Gaia*) are related to the appearance of computer technology and the Internet. The link between a religious connotation of evolutionary history and media theory is based upon the work of the philosopher and Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) and its specific reception by the Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980). Both McLuhan’s metaphor of the *global village* and Teilhard’s concept of the evolutionary revelation of god – beginning with the biosphere, continuing with the noosphere, and finalizing in the divine point Omgea – are prevalently adopted in the current discourse on the Internet. Within the framework of Gaia theory initiated by James Lovelock (*1919), an interpretation of the Internet as an organic part of earth’s history enforces the idea of understanding the current technological development as continuing the natural evolution of life on this planet.

In the following, a hermeneutic analysis in the sense of a history of reception (*Rezeptionsgeschichte*) shall present the contour of this partly religious, partly philosophical discourse more precisely. In consideration of this hermeneutic premise, concepts that presume an unchanging semantic structure and rely on conceptual categories, such as “being unrecognized” (*Verkanntwerden*) or “misinterpretation,” are not applicable. Rather, this analysis will trace new contextualisations of certain ideas with regard to concrete patterns of selection and interpretation (Jauß 1987; Stausberg 1998:2-4). Thus, some exponents of the community ideal of cyberspace are first presented, followed by a detailed analysis of the central concept of the noosphere in the works of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Marshall McLuhan. Finally, a closer treatment of the Gaia theory and its religious reception is provided. In order to uncover the specific processes of reception and selection applied by contemporary cyber-visionaries, it is essential to consider the historical contexts of religious and philosophical interpretations of evolution which coined the dominating patterns of recent reception.

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quote of a lesser known computer scientist, Heim attempts to document the esoteric essence of the Internet. See Heim 1993:123-128.

3 Referring the body discourse in cyberspace see Krüger 2004a.

4 Cyberutopia

When the World Wide Web spread in the mid-1990s into more and more American companies and private households and the various earlier computer networks were substituted or brought together, technological visionaries construed the Internet as harbinger of a new age. One of the most prominent figures in this context was the American computer scientist Mark Pesce, who established the first generally binding standard for the visual presentation of virtual reality (*Virtual Reality Modeling Language*, *VRML*) in 1994. In his numerous publications, presentations at conferences, and media appearances, he not only showcased his technological innovations but he related them to his vivid vision of the future Internet. Thus, in his book *Playful World*, amid the narration of the invention of VRML he introduces the Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin as the most significant but long-forgotten prophet of the Internet: " … no one foresaw the importance and comprehensive impact of the World Wide Web. But, over fifty years ago, one fairly obscure scientist did predict a coming transformation of the human mind, the birth of collective intelligence, and the emergence of a new way of knowing" (Pesce 2000:164).

Along with the idea that all human beings will soon be united spiritually, Pesce adopted Teilhard's concept of the noosphere:

> We can't know for sure if the Web is the same thing as the noosphere, or if the Web represents part of what Teilhard envisioned. But it feels that way ... If Teilhard was right, the Web is part of our evolution, as much an essential element of humanity as our acute eyes, our crafty hands, and our wonderful brains (Pesce 2000: 170).

Equating the Internet with the noosphere, Pesce implied that this technology was no ordinary media innovation, such as radio or television had been at their time. According to Pesce, the outstanding emergence of the Internet refers to a spiritual dimension:

> Meine Arbeit rund um WebEarth hat viel mit Spiritualität zu tun, mit der Idee der Gaia, des Planeten als Lebewesen. Wenn ich diese Arbeit Leuten zum ersten Mal zeige, packt es sie oft richtig; manche weinen … Mit VRML wird die Noosphäre viel greifbarer werden. Die Leute werden sie als echten Ort erkennen, obwohl sie nur aus Daten besteht (Bennahum 1997).

In speaking so, Pesce connects the ideas of Teilhard with Gaia theory, a perspective that has had great significance for New Age thinkers and environmentalists such as Ken Wilber and Terence McKenna. Thus, the Internet is conceptualised as an organic part of the earth, destined to come into existence as part of the natural evolutionary process.

The most comprehensive application of Teilhard's ideas to the area of cyber-discourse can be found in the work of American theologian Jennifer Cobb. In her book, *Cybergrace: The Search for God in the Digital Space* (1998), Cobb – who has been an IT professional for more than 15 years – interprets cyberspace as an unlimited space for the development of the intellectual, spiritual and emotional potentials of humanity. If human beings could understand the true significance of computer technologies, then, according to Cobb, the world can be experienced anew as a divine reality beyond the dualism of mind and matter (Cobb 1998:8-11).

> In the ongoing process of spiritual evolution, cyberspace has a special role to play … In this vision, the spiritual basis of the universe is understood as creative events unfolding in time … Cyberspace can help guide us toward a reconciliation of the major schisms of our time, those between science and spirit, between the organic world and the world that we create (Cobb 1998:43).

Principally, Cobb draws on Teilhard's multi-level evolutionary model with a particular focus on the leap from the biosphere to the noosphere. However, she is of the opinion that Teilhard's ideas can be accurately understood only in the face of the emergence of cyberspace:

> This distinctly non-traditional evolutionary idea may strike us as odd until we consider the phenomenon of cyberspace, that electronically supported layer of human consciousness that now encircles the globe (Cobb 1998:85).

Like many other Protestant theologians in the United States, Cobb seeks an alliance between the sciences and Christian theology and legitimates her religious interpretation of cyberspace as the evolution of divine creativity in the universe (Cobb 1998:12, 51-97).

> Creative process forms the soul of cyberspace. The source of richness and potential in this vast, electronic web of experience is spirit. The divine expresses itself in the digital terrain through the vast, global communication networks that are now beginning to display rudimentary self-organizing properties (Cobb 1998:44).

From Cobb's viewpoint, humankind must recognize the progress of computer technology as a divine plan:

> It is when this knowledge comes fully into our conscious awareness that our deeper journey with cyberspace will truly have begun (Cobb 1998:239)

The physicist and posthumanist thinker Frank Tipler, professor of mathematical physics at New Orleans' Tulane University, goes a step further than Cobb. Together with the English cosmo-

physicist John D. Barrow, Tipler published his chief scientific work, *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle*, in 1986 (Barrow and Tipler 1986), which included a teleological interpretation of the history of the universe. However, Tipler shot to fame with his book *The Physics of Immortality: Modern Cosmology, God and the Resurrection of the Dead*, published in 1994 (Tipler 1995). Here, he advocates the position of the so called natural theology, and he is absolutely convinced that only the sciences – above all mathematics and physics – will enable us to better understand god and the destination of human beings as part of divine creation:

> The only book which does not suffer from these limitations is the Book of Nature, the only book which God wrote with His/Her own hand, without human assistance. The book of nature is not limited by human understanding. The Book of Nature is the only reliable guide to the true Nature of God (Tipler 1995:337).

In his cosmological perspective, Tipler assumes that god has created the universe in order to unfold his own personality entirely through the coming history of the universe. The target, not only of the natural evolution on earth but also of the whole cosmological development, is presented as the point Omega. According to Tipler, humankind takes on the key role in this divine plan, being the only intelligent forms of life in the cosmos: through the emergence of artificially intelligent beings, which are created by men and are supposed to populate all galaxies, the whole universe shall be transformed into a single thinking unit, into a gigantic cosmic computer. The human race is only an intermediate stage in the history of evolution, and will eventually be overcome by posthuman entities.[4] When finally god is realized in the point Omega, then also the history of the universe will have come to an end:

> At the instant the Omega Point is reached, life will have gained control of *all* matter and forces ...; life will have spread into *all* spatial regions in all universes which could logically exist, and we will have stored an infinite amount of information, including all bits of knowledge which is logically possible to know. And this is the end (Barrow and Tipler 1986:677).

Mark Pesce, Jennifer Cobb and Frank Tipler understand the concept of evolution outlined by Teilhard de Chardin in different ways, either as the spiritual evolution of humanity, or as an explicit unfolding of the Christian god. Apart from these differences, they share the assumption that the emergence of the Internet, and of networked information technology in general, is *the* crucial leap in earthly natural evolution, and they all apply a religious perspective in their interpretations of these phenomena.

4 Concerning Frank Tipler and the general topic of posthumanism see Krüger 2004b:103-400.

5 Teilhard de Chardin and Marshall McLuhan

These examples may have illustrated how the singular ideas of Teilhard de Chardin are perceived in the current cyber discourse – “googling” this topic with adequate keywords[5] will generate links on hundreds of similar academic and popular contributions that idealise Teilhard to be the great mastermind of the Internet. This strong reception within media discourse is remarkable since Teilhard de Chardin – as far as I can see – remained mute about media with the exception of two short notes (see below). In my view, the work of Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan, who eclectically picked up Teilhard’s ideas, prepared the ground for these ideas in media theory and cultivated so much interest. In the popular discourse, and sometimes even in academic discourse, both thinkers are even considered to be interchangeable. McLuhan is said to “flirt” with Teilhard’s ideas, their theories are assumed to be congruent (Hickey 2005:64; Curtis 2005:164-165), and it is generally accepted that, “McLuhan’s ‚global village’ was nothing other than Teilhard’s ‚noosphere’” (Wolfe 2003). Therefore, it is essential in the following section to examine the relation between McLuhan and Teilhard de Chardin, to illuminate the popular and evidently dominating synthesis of McLuhan’s idea of the global village and Teilhard’s noosphere, a synthesis which anticipates a religious interpretation of the Internet.

After entering the order of the Jesuits, being ordained to the priesterhood, and studying theology, philosophy and the sciences, Teilhard focused his academic interests mainly on palaeontology, in particular on the early history of humankind. Already his first, partly mystic publications,[6] written while serving as a stretcher-bearer in World War I, include suggestions of a divinely-governed evolution of the cosmos. During the next 40 years of his academic and theological work, and especially during his long “exile” in China, he advanced this central idea.

In spite of his many worldly distinctions such as the nomination as *Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur* (1947) and his membership to the *Institut de France* (1950), the Vatican prohibited the publication of Teilhard’s philosophical and theological tracts– the acceptance and development of the Darwinian theory of evolution seemed to be far too progressive for the head of the Jesuit order at that time. Teilhard spent his last years, from 1952 to 1955, occupied with expeditions and lecture tours, as a research fellow at the *Wenner Gren Foundation* in New York.

Although Teilhard was not allowed to publish his thoughts, his ideas were well known in philosophical and scientific circles due to his numerous lectures and unremitting correspondences. Thus, in the year of his death the complete edition of his works in French, English and German was compiled by a board of prominent international scientists (such as Julian Huxley and Arnold

5 Googling such keywords as “Teilhard“, “noosphere“ combined with “Internet“ or “Cyberspace“.
6 E.g. „La vie cosmique“ (1916) and „Mon univers“ (1924).

Toynbee). Simultaneously, with the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), widespread reception of Teilhard's work began within and beyond the Catholic church – already by the late 1970s, bibliographies listed more than 10.000 titles of secondary literature on Teilhard.[7]

Stimulated by Henri Bergson's attempt to synthesize the Christian idea of creation and the Darwinian evolutionism in *L'évolution créatrice* (1907), Teilhard called for a fruitful interplay of scientific findings and religious cognition.[8]

According to Teilhard, mind and matter are the two dynamic conditions of the original cosmic entity. Beginning at the starting point *alpha*, god let the universe develop into a system of greater and greater complexity. In his chief work, *The Human Phenomenon* (*Le Phénomène humain*, 1955), Teilhard depicts the evolutionary process as a continuous unfolding of mind, starting with the pre-stage of the emergence of the solar system and the earth (*cosmogénèse*), followed by the formation of life in the biosphere (*biogénèse*), and finally arriving at the spread of the noosphere (*noogénèsis*) with the appearance of the first hominids, who differ from their animal ancestors by their consciousness of self:

> Quand, pour la première fois l'instinct s'est aperçu au miroir de lui-même, c'est le Monde tout entier qui a fait un pas … Juste aussi extensive, mais bien plus cohérente encore, nous le verrons, que toutes les nappes précédentes, c'est vraiment une nappe nouvelle, la „nappe pensante", qui, après avoir germé au Tertiaire finissant, s'étale depuis lors par-dessous le monde des Plantes et des Animaux: hors et au-dessus de la Biosphère, une *Noosphère*.[9]

With the scientific and philosophical dominance of the West since early Christianity, according to Teilhard, the "convergence of thinking" and the "planetisation of the noosphere" began:

> … grâce au prodigieux événement biologique représenté par la découverte des ondes électro-magnétiques, chaque individu se trouve désormais (activement et passivement) simultanément présent à la totalité de la mer et des continents, – coextensif à la Terre (Teilhard de Chardin 1955:266-267).

7 For a biographic and bibliographic overview see Daecke 2000 and Trennert-Helwig 2005.

8 Beside Bergson, the French philosopher and successor on Bergson's chair at the *Collège de France*, Édouard Le Roy (1870-1954), evidently played an important role for the formation of Teilhard's interpretation of evolution. Partly referring to Teilhard's early, unpublished works, Le Roy wrote already in 1928 on the *phénomène humain*, on the biosphere and the process of becoming human (*hominisation*) by the spreading of the noosphere. On the one hand, Le Roy goes back to Bergson's idea of the *élan vital*, but on the other hand he also draws on the evolutionary model of the distinguished Russian geologist Vladimir I. Vernadsky (1863-1945). See Le Roy 1928:1-57; Simon and Pitt 1999; Vernadsky 1997:21-85.

9 Teilhard de Chardin 1955:200-202. This idea has some aspects in common with the *evolutionary humanism* concept of Julian Huxley (1887-1975), who also advocated a multi-stage model of evolution from the cosmic to the post-biological (=human) age. See Huxley 1964:9-52.

As a result of this “collective cerebralisation“, scientific advancement, fueled by the additional impulse of the “astonishing capacities of the newest electronic automata,” (Teilhard de Chardin 1961:118) and the progress of cybernetics, as Teilhard promises, the perfecting of the human brain will be accelerated, in particular if the methods of eugenics are applied (Teilhard de Chardin 1955:263-323). Teilhard understands this process of evolution as ascension of consciousness and as a process of unification of humanity – only if all peoples and all social classes aim at the same goal the psycho-biological development of a “mega-synthesis” of one humanity can be realized (Teilhard de Chardin 1955:270-272):

> Une collectivité harmonisée des consciences, équivalente à une sorte de super-conscience. La Terre non seulement se couvrant de grains de pensée par myriardes, mais s’enveloppant d’une seule enveloppe pensante, jusqu’à ne plus former fonctionellement qu’en seul vaste Grain de Pensée, à l’échelle sidérale (Teilhard de Chardin 1955:331).

At the “end of the world,” the noosphere will finally reach its point of convergence when the total of all individual consciousness flows together and creates a new, super-personal consciousness. This point Omega can be realized according to Teilhard only by the power of universal love. By the appearance of Jesus humankind has been chosen to play this extraordinary role, developing the point Omega, in the history of the cosmos.

> Si le monde est convergent, et si le Christ en occupe le centre, alors la Christogénèse de saint Paul et de saint Jean n’est rien autre chose, ni rien moins, que le prolongement à la fois attendu et inespéré de la Noogénèse en laquelle, pour notre expérience, culmine la Cosmogénèse … Seul, absolument seul sur la Terre moderne, il [le Christianisme: O.K.] se montre capable de synthétiser dans un seul acte vital le Tout et la Personne (Teilhard de Chardin 1955:331).

Even in this brief summary of Teilhard’s ideas, the many potential factors for the later reception of his work are visible, ranging from eugenics and Catholic theology, New Age thought and posthumanism, to the above-named cyber utopia. Evidently, it is due to Marshall McLuhan that Teilhard is received so broadly, although media are widely irrelevant for Teilhard, and it is clear that his entire work is mainly focused on biological evolution in an explicitly Christian context.

Marshall McLuhan converted to Roman Catholicism in 1937, was employed at three Catholic universities,[10] attended mass every day, and was in close contact with many Catholic theologians, in particular with some Jesuits. His public commentaries on religious issues were sometimes quite on the fringe, and characterized him as a queer fellow – e.g. he vigorously criticized the decision of the

10 McLuhan was employed from 1937-1944 at the Jesuit St. Louis University (Missouri), from 1944-1946 at the Assumption College (Windsor, Canada) and since 1946 at St. Michael’s College (Toronto).

Second Vatican Council (1961-1965) to abolish Latin as the liturgical language (Eric McLuhan 1999: XXV; Marshall McLuhan 1999a). Hence, it is not surprising that there was a very special relation between McLuhan and Teilhard de Chardin – the crucial link in the chain is the American theologian and Jesuit Walter J. Ong (1912-2003). From 1938 to 1941, Ong studied English literature and philosophy at St. Louis University, where the young McLuhan was teaching English (1937 to 1944); McLuhan also acted as Ong's adviser for his master's thesis on the Victorian Jesuit and poet Gerald Manley Hopkins (1844-1889), whose works deeply influenced Ong's later idea of a theological connection between evolution and the revelation of god. During this time, Ong and McLuhan cultivated a friendly relationship and frequently exchanged letters – Ong even dedicated the second volume of his dissertation to "Herbert Marshall McLuhan who started all this" (Ong 1958). While staying in Paris as a Guggenheim fellow in the early 1950s, Ong lived in the same lodgings as Teilhard de Chardin, where he was given the opportunity to study the manuscript of Teilhard's posthumously published chief work, *Le Phénomène Humain* (1955).

But when Ong was assigned to write a review for McLuhan's first book, *The Mechanical Bride* (McLuhan 1951), he took the opportunity to publish some crucial elements of Teilhard's work (Farrell 2003). Following McLuhan's critique of American culture in his *Mechanical Bride*, Ong raises the question of how Catholic theology can respond in an industrial age, and then he ventures into a discussion of Teilhard's (censored) ideas. Ong introduces the concepts of the cosmosphere and the biosphere, and finally refers to the promise of the noosphere:

> In a third stage, slowly, man, with human intelligence, has made his way over the surface of the earth into all its parts … with the whole world alerted simultaneously every day to goings-on in Washington, Paris, London, Rio de Janeiro, Rome and (with reservations) Moscow – human consciousness has succeeded in enveloping the entire globe in a third and still more perfect kind of sphere, the sphere of intelligence, the 'noosphere,' as it has been styled by Father Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J. (Ong 1952:84).

Ong became Teilhard's most important advocate in the Anglophone world (Ong 1977). Thus, it is evident that McLuhan was familiar with Teilhard's ideas at least from Ong's review in 1952, even before McLuhan began his research in communication and media studies. As far as I can see, there are straight references to Teilhard only in McLuhan's *Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), probably because of outside critiques and his own increasingly sceptical attitude towards Teilhard's work.[11]

11 See Marchand 1998:216-218. Media researcher and son of Marshall McLuhan, Eric McLuhan, describes this relation even more skeptical: "I do know that my father did not find anything in Teilhard's thought that he considered of potential use as regards his own work." E-mail by Eric McLuhan to Oliver Krüger, 17.02.2006.

At the opening of his *Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan draws the attention of his readers to Teilhard's work, „the lyrical testimony of a very Romantic biologist" (McLuhan 2002:32), and quotes a description of the global unification process and technological progress from *Le Phénomèn Humain*. Immediately, McLuhan adds that Teilhard's optimistic promises have been fiercely criticized by intellectuals, but then he also introduces Teilhard's notion of the noosphere:

> This externalisation of our senses creates what de Chardin called the 'noosphere' or a technological brain for the world. Instead of tending towards a vast Alexandrian library the world has become a computer, an electronic brain, exactly as in an infantile piece of science fiction (McLuhan 2002:32).

In the decisive passage where McLuhan refers to Teilhard, electronic media become the "cosmic membrane that has been snapped round the globe" (McLuhan 2002:32), and two further passages in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* linking the idea of evolutionism and the progress of media technology refer to Teilhard (McLuhan 2002:46, 174). McLuhan's subsequent commentaries about Teilhard's work became more diverse, or even contradictory. Though McLuhan does not mention the French Jesuit by name in his third book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), he does refer to Henri Bergson's *L'évolution créatrice*, and his utopia of a harmonic electronic age is guided by Bergson's idea that language is to blame for the separation of humankind:

> Electricity points the way to an extension of the process of consciousness itself, on a world scale, and without any verbalization whatever. Such a state of collective awareness may have been the preverbal condition of men. Language as the technology of human extension, whose powers of division and separation we know so well, may have been the ‚Tower of Babel' by which men sought to scale the highest heavens. Today computers hold out the promise of a means of instant translation of any code or language into any other code or language. The computer, in short, promises by technology a Pentecostal condition of universal understanding and unity. The next logical step would seem to be, not to translate, but to by-pass languages in favor of a general cosmic consciousness, which might be very like the collective unconscious dreamt of by Bergson. The condition of ‚weightlessness,' that biologists say promises a physical immortality, may be paralleled by the condition of speechlessness that could confer a perpetuity of collective harmony and peace (McLuhan 1994:80).

However, Bergson's book was also the initial point for Teilhard's ideas about a Christian interpretation of evolutionism. McLuhan is even far more enthusiastic than Bergson:

> If the work of the city is the remaking or translating of man into a more suitable form than his nomadic ancestors achieved, then might not our current translation of our entire lives into the spiritual

> form of information seem to make of the entire globe, and of the human family, a single consciousness? (McLuhan 1994:61)

In other publications and interviews, McLuhan chooses a more analytical attitude, contending that he himself does not see any inherent religious significance of electronic media but "we would not belittle the merely cultural power of the non-literate and the literate forms of life to shape the perceptions and biases of the entire human community" (McLuhan 2002:68)[12].

When he was asked outright in an interview in 1970 about the parallels of his work and Teilhard's ideas, McLuhan gave a sophisticated answer without mentioning Teilhard: he rejected all potential predictions of the future impact of media technology as mere speculation. However, he considered that the omnipresence produced by media could be an incitement for the religious seeker (McLuhan 1999b:87-88).

McLuhan's explicit critique of religious interpretations of the "electronic age," on the other hand, also reflect his admiration for the new communication technologies:

> Electric information environments being utterly ethereal fosters the illusion of the world as a spiritual substance. It is now a reasonable facsimile of the mystical body, a blatant manifestation of the Anti-Christ. After all, the Prince of this World is a very great electric engineer (McLuhan 1999c:70-72).

On other occasions McLuhan disapproved of the idea of a harmonious global community,[13] referring to his concept of *retribalization* – electronic media would support individualism due to the missing hierarchies and social centres, therefore threatening the existence of community life. Indeed, by the end of the 1960s, McLuhan no longer advanced a euphoric opinion on the future impact of electronic media; rather, he declined to make any further evaluations or predictions. The *global village* – a notion inspired by Wyndham Lewis' book *America and Cosmic Man* – became his leading metaphor for the media society.[14] McLuhan's book *War and Peace in the Global Village* (1968) shows that he considered this *global village* also as a place full of conflicts and crises (McLuhan 1968).

McLuhan's differences with Teilhard become apparent in the use of the notion of consciousness. With the exception of a few euphoric predictions in the *Gutenberg Galaxy* and in *Understanding Media*, McLuhan understands the *extension of consciousness* as an augmented

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12 Also see the reception of Mircea Eliade in McLuhan's work, ibid. 67-71.

13 He harshly criticizes the emergence of a new oral society: „Terror is the normal state of any oral society, for in it everything affects everything all the time." McLuhan 2002:32.

14 The well known painter and author Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957) was McLuhan's collegue at Assumption College of Windsor University. Lewis wrote in *America and Cosmic Man*: " … the earth has become one big village, with telephones laid from one end to the other, and air transport both speedy and safe …" Lewis 1948:21.

ability of individual reception and not as *one* common collective consciousness culminating finally in point Omega. The global village is a village and not a town because, metaphorically, everyone knows everything of everyone – but without necessarily sharing the views of our fellow men:

> With such awareness, the subliminal life, private and social, has been hooked up into full view, with the result that we have ‚social consciousness' presented to us as a cause of guilt feelings … In the electric age we wear all mankind as our skin (McLuhan 1994:47).

6 The noosphere, the global village and point Omega

Closer inspection of the relation between Marshall McLuhan and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin might have shown that there are indeed some significant differences in their theoretical concepts. But now, it is even more promising to investigate the concrete processes of reception of Teilhard's work in the recent interpretations of the Internet. Teilhard is no media theorist, the notions of "information" and "communication" are irrelevant in his idea of a cosmic history, and he introduces the term of the noosphere in the context of theological and philosophical considerations of the ascent of human consciousness. Yet, it is evident that McLuhan's presentation of Teilhard's ideas in the *Gutenberg Galaxy* has been authoritative for the later reception of Teilhard in popular and academic media discourse: first, Teilhard is introduced as a "romantic biologist" and in no way as a Catholic theologian in the Jesuit tradition; second, McLuhan makes no mention of the Christian context of Teilhard's evolutionary model; and third, he keeps quiet about the very the centre of Teilhard's theory, the convergence of human consciousness in the future point Omega. Thus, Teilhard's ideas appear as completely non-theological in McLuhan's works (Boehmisch 1998).

Finally, Teilhard's notion of the noosphere is clearly reinterpreted by McLuhan. Paralleling the layer of thought which emerged with the appearance of the first hominids in Teilhard's work, McLuhan determines the noosphere as the "technological brain" – the whole world becomes a computer. In doing so, McLuhan performs three modifications that prepared the notion of the noosphere for its broad reception in cyber discourse: first, the noosphere is contextualised as a term of media technology; second, the emergence of the noosphere is dated to the beginning of the "electrical age" – our present time; and third, the noosphere implies, according to McLuhan an already existing global network.[15] In this manner, McLuhan supports an extraordinary appreciation of our current media developments – what was a slow process of the "planetization" of the

15 Teilhard separated the emergence of the noosphere thousands of years ago from the future "planetization" and "convergence of thinking". See Teilhard de Chardin 1955:211-235.

noosphere, or a continuous convergence of thinking, becomes suddenly a higher level of evolution initialized by the spread of radio, television and computers in the "electronic age" in McLuhan's works.

For our analysis of the cultural reception of the Internet, there is in addition to the close connection of media and evolution still another important aspect to be considered. From a holistic perspective electronic media and the Internet are received as part of an unfolding organism – initially Marc Pesce referred to the idea that media are vital elements of Gaia, the earth. In this context, it is significant that McLuhan took the first step to "organise" the electronic media: apart from the basic assumption that media are an extension of our physical senses, McLuhan introduces the biological metaphors of the "electronic brain" and the "cosmic membrane", while Teilhard used the metaphor of the "thinking envelope" (*enveloppe pensante*).[16]

7 Gaia

The so called Gaia theory was developed in the late 1960s by the British physician, geophysicist and ecologist James E. Lovelock. Lovelock starts with the idea that the earth, together with all its inhabitants, has to be understood as one holistic organism. With his book *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (1979), Lovelock greatly influenced the upcoming environmental movement as well as many holistic thinkers of various religious traditions and innovations:

> The result of this more single-minded approach was the development of the hypothesis that the entire range of living matter on Earth, from whales to viruses, and from oaks to algae, could be regarded as constituting a single living entity, capable of manipulating the Earth's atmosphere to suit its overall needs and endowed with faculties and powers far beyond those of its constituent parts (Lovelock 1991:9).

Thus, the earth appears as a threatened planet that has to be preserved and must not be recklessly exploited. Lovelock showed that the earth as a whole reacts to the actions of its inhabitants, in particular to the increasing air pollution caused by humankind (Lovelock 1991:64-123). This crucial idea, that the totality of all living matter on earth constitutes one entity, has been adopted in diverse discourses.[17]

16 This reference to biological terms is not due to a misinterpretation from French into English since the English text also uses the common notion of the *thinking envelope*. See Teilhard de Chardin 1959:251.

17 The ideas of Lovelock have been adopted in the context of environmentalism primarily by the Brazilian ecologist José Lutzenberger (1926-2002) who initialized the *Gaia Foundation* in 1987. See Lutzenberger 1990:101-108. Lovelock has been surprised by the religious reception of his work: "I was naïve to think that a book about Gaia

Lovelock's choice of the name of the Greek goddess of the earth, Gaia, for a holistic notion of the earth facilitated the broad reception of the Gaia theory within feminist theology. The British theologian Anne Primavesi (*1934) considers the right understanding of Gaia to be the centre of all theology in our time:

> Theology at this level is an earth science. This simply affirms that the systematic organization of human knowledge, in this case knowledge of God, now includes in its remit and discussions the environment in which that knowledge is systemized … Gaia theory shows us that … all living beings on earth are in physical contact at one remove through its water, atmosphere and soils … [18]

Beside explicitly Christian theologians, prominent New Age thinkers such as Peter Russell (*1946),[19] Ken Wilber (*1949)[20] and Fritjof Capra (*1939)[21] adopted elements of the Gaia theory and reconnected them once again with Teilhard's teleological interpretation of evolution.[22] On the other hand Lovelock's approach is often linked in the American context to the more rational work of the philosopher and architect Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983), who was very popular in his time.[23] The current heterogeneous Gaia movement unifies the ideas of well-known thinkers like Teilhard and Lovelock, with diverse ideas and practices from ecology, astrology, Buddhism, Hopi-Indian culture, and neo-shamanism.[24]

The recent reception of the Gaia theory in the discourse about electronic media is mainly due to decisive efforts by James Lovelock himself, aided by McLuhan's advocated relation between evolution and media. The ecologist is deeply convinced that progress of sciences and of cybernetics

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would be taken as science only." See Lovelock 2003:532.

18 Primavesi 2000:20. Even more significantly than Primavesi, the Catholic theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether (*1936) enforces a political perspective of ecofeminism, aiming at a balance of the "male God" and the "female Gaia". See Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia & God. An Ecofeminist Theology of Healing*, San Francisco: Harper 1992, 254-274.

19 Russell links the spiritualized Gaia theory with the emergence of a global brain of higher consciousness which might be based on the "interlinking of humanity" by the Internet. See Russell 2000, 64-69.

20 In his "integral theory," Wilber refers to many elements of Gaia theory as well as to Teilhard's ideas. The notion of biosphere, noosphere and point Omega are essential for his theory, though not in a Christian sense but in the sense of an evolutionary teleology. See Wilber 1995:85-87, 111-113.

21 Capra – as well as other New Age thinkers – combines ecological approaches of the Gaia-Theory with evolutionism and the vision of a spiritual renewal of a unified humanity. See Capra 1982: 284-285.

22 According to Marylin Ferguson, author of the influential New Age book *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (1980), Teilhard de Chardin is actually the most frequently quoted author among New Age believers. See Ferguson 1980:50-51, 93, 420.

23 In the 1930s, Fuller proposed a rational vision of a world community that is able to live in accordance with aesthetics and nature on the "spaceship earth" because of scientific-technological progress. See Fuller 1938:356-360; Fuller and Dil 1983:11-17.

24 See http://www.gaiamind.com; http://www.gaia-net.de. Judith L. Boice depicts her experiences in *Gaian Communities* very colorfully. See Boice 1990. A linguistic analysis of the reception of Gaia seems to be a promising undertaking – the term is used as a name for a Neo-Hindu healer in Munich as well as for a label for rechargeable batteries.

in particular, as part of the natural evolution of humankind, will also lead to a better understanding of Gaia – as long as human beings are still in touch with nature (Lovelock 1991:127-140). Although he is concerned with national resistances, Lovelock shares with Teilhard an optimistic outlook of future life on our planet, since the earth is now conscious of its own existence:

> Still more important is the implication that the evolution of the homo sapiens, with his technological inventiveness and his increasingly subtle communication network, has vastly increased Gaia's range of perception. She is now through us awake and aware of herself (Lovelock 1991:148).

Referring to the analogy of biological brains and networked computers, Lovelock anticipates the later cyber theories:

> Our brains can be likened to medium-size computers which are directly linked to one another and to memory banks, as well as to an almost unlimited array of sensors, peripheral devices, and other machines Lovelock 1991:150.

As demonstrated in our considerations so far, the reception of Teilhard de Chardin in the context of the Internet is obviously a complex, non-linear process which is mainly based, on the one hand, on McLuhan's notion of media and evolution, and on the other hand on Lovelock's organic interpretation of media as a part of Gaia. Teilhard is presented in the figure of an unrecognized prophet; in Mark Pesce's book he appears as a modern and prescient theorist of evolutionism (Pesce 2000:164-171); Jennifer Cobb depicts him as an "obscure Jesuit priest and paleontologist" (Cobb 1995). Pesce completely hides Teilhard's theological background and connects the concept of the noosphere with Gaia and the Internet; Cobb outlines a spiritual vision of cyberspace exceeding the limits of mere Christian theology, and avoids any references to Teilhard's christology. The point Omega as the convergence of human thought is only adopted by the posthumanist thinker Frank Tipler.

Further, the concept of the noosphere in McLuhan's sense is adopted by today's cyber-theorists, but there is an important shift: the emergence of the noosphere is no longer linked to the dim notion of the "electronic age" but concretely to the spread of the Internet. In this manner, an extraordinary significance is attributed to the Internet as the decisive step of evolution. Additionally, the construed relation between a religious, or spiritual, teleology (Pesce) and the idea of a continuous revelation of god through the Internet (Cobb) and through computer technology in general terms (Tipler) – so the chain of Gaia, god and the Internet – bestows upon new media an

absolutely singular significance in the context of the earthly and even of the cosmic evolution of life.[25]

8 Contexts

The reception of the idea of the noosphere and Gaia theory is not a phenomenon to be clinically dissected, settled in a "cultural vacuum," but it is a process embedded in a field of receptive conditions. These dominant patterns of reception may influence the concrete cognition of certain phenomena, and sometimes they illuminate the intercultural differences of the reception of similar ideas – consequently, the close connection of the revelation of god with modern media technology as an aspect of evolution initially emerges as an a mere American idea. A certain complex of ideas in American and European philosophy plays a significant role for the cultural reception of the Internet, which shall be surveyed below. In this context the prevailing pattern of reception is the idea of the advancement of life forms along the history of evolution, which is legitimized as partly religious or metaphysical, or as merely materialistic.

The American historian Arthur Oncken Lovejoy (1873-1962) shed light on the initial cultural reception of modern evolutionism in his splendid *William James Lectures* at Harvard in 1932/33. In his comprehensive work, which begins with Plato and Aristotle, he deals with a crucial philosophical and religious idea of the occident: *the great chain of being*. For many centuries the idea of the connectivity of all beings was underlying the philosophical and theological discourse on the position of humankind as part of the cosmic creation; it has been advocated by numerous thinkers, such as John Locke, Alexander Pope, Edmund Law, Leibniz, Kant, Herder and Diderot in modern times. This chain is defined by the distance to god as the origin of all creatures, and the ranking starts with the lowest organisms and the animals, then human beings and angels, and ends up in god. In the 18th century, English author Soame Jenyns (1704-1787) translated this hierarchy into the order of the human races, and he contrasts the genius of the West, Isaac Newton, with the "wild nature of the Hottentot". Initially, this chain was assumed to be static, consisting of the perfect and complete hierarchy of all beings as god created them in the beginning of the world, and as they will continue to exist until the end of the world (Lovejoy 1961:183-200).

It was the Swiss natural philosopher Charles Bonnet (1720-1793) who named the idea of the Dutch scientist Jan Swammerdam (1637-1680) that all life has developed from a germ, in which future development is already implicit as *evolution* – as unfolding and uncoiling of an already

25 Of course, in this discursive strategy the agents and "prophets" of the Internet are supposed to be important, too.

existing structure. Arthur McCalla considers this as evidence that the terminological basis of later evolutionism has its roots in the Christian idea of advancement:

> Evolution is here a synonym for the preformationist archetypal pattern of essence and development that purports to be at once scientific and soterological (McCalla 1998:30).

Bonnet, as well as the Swabian pietist and natural philosopher Friedrich Christoph Oetinger (1702-1782), advocated in the context of this biological preformationism the idea of an increase of biological complexity and spiritual capacity of creatures, with god realising himself in the history of evolution as *ens manifestativum sui*, according to Oetinger. Evolution is seen as the augmentation of divine corporeality. In the 18th century, the idea of the *great chain of being* is completely temporalized, the hierarchy of creatures becomes dynamic. It is now a hierarchy that asks for a genealogical ascension because all potentials of being in the universe will seek their realisation, and this can happen only in a temporal progression (Lovejoy 1961:242-287; McCalla 1998:29-31).[26]

Though the thesis of continuous perfection of natural creation has already been expressed by Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802) and Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829) (Lovejoy 1961:227-241; Spadafora 1990:234; Staudinger 1986:167-168), it was not until Charles Darwin (1809-1882) that a theory of evolution was drafted on an empirical basis. Principally, Darwin rejected all teleological implications of the history of evolution, but his notion of the emergence of higher and more and more advanced and perfect creatures[27] in the closing words of his chief work *On the Origin of Species* (1859), and in some private letters, has provided a basis for all teleological interpretations of evolution (Benz 1965:81-91, 148-150; Baillie 1950:145-147). In spite of some opposition towards this teleology[28] the idea of a continuous advancement of life was widespread in rational and scientific discourses,[29] as well as in religious discourses. Despite the frequently and strikingly quoted fundamentalist resistance against Darwinism, there were a large number of Protestant theologians and philosophers who were committed to bringing evolutionism in accordance with the Christian salvific history.[30] The temporalization of the *great chain of being* and the acceptance of

26 Evidently, Tipler receives Lovejoy’s work. See Tipler 1995: 216, 385.

27 Darwin’s closing words give an optimistic outlook: “And as Natural Selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection.“ Darwin 1988: 347.

28 Most prominently Heinrich Rickert, Julian Huxley and Richard Dawkins opposed a teleological interpretation of evolution.

29 Most important among these popularizations of Darwinism are the works of the German zoologist and natural philosopher Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919), *Die natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte* (1868), *Welträthsel* (1899) which have been largely distributed in all major Western languages.

30 Most notably among these theologians are the conservative Biblicist Minot Judson Savage (1841-1918), who considered the problem of theodicy as a kind of *maladjustment* that will be cured in the future evolutionary process, and the Scottish Presbytarian and later Princeton philosopher James McCosh (1811-1894), who opposed an atheistic interpretation in his book *The Religious Aspect of Evolution*. Also, the Christian scientist Henry Drummond (1851-1897) has been very influential with his Lowell Lectures, titled *The Ascent of Man* (1894).

inner-worldly progress in the context of postmillennialism evidently form the background of the modern reception of evolutionism.

Notwithstanding the significance of these theological interpretations, it is evident that the works of the three philosophers Henri Bergson (1859-1941), Samuel Alexander (1859-1938) and Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) are of greater importance for Teilhard and the later reception of the noosphere in the media context.

As a thinker in the tradition of the philosophy of life, Bergson opposes a rational-positivistic interpretation of evolution in his chief work *L'évolution créatrice* (1907). The development of life forms cannot be simply reduced to mechanistic laws of action, which always produce the same results under the same conditions. Evolution is much more creative – thus, Bergson disapproves of teleological interpretations as well as mechanistic reductions (Bergson 1909:57-73, 392-399). In fact, the development of life forms is driven by a metaphysical spirit of life, a power of life – the *élan vital* – which is inherent in every creature:

> Nous revenons ainsi, par un long détour, à l'idée d'où nous étion partis, celle d'un *élan originel* de la vie, passant d'une génération de germes à la génération suivante de germes par l'intermédiaire des organismes développés qui forment entre les germes le trait d'union. Cet élan, se conservant sur les lignes d'évolution entre lesquelles il se partage, est la cause profonde des variations, du moins de celles qui se transmettent régulièrement, qui s'additionnent, qui créent des espèces nouvelles (Bergson 1909:95).

This *élan vital* constitutes, according to Bergson, the metaphysical unity of life that generates new forms of life over and over, by the struggle of mind and matter (Bergson 1909:95-106).

Samuel Alexander regards Darwinism, in his book *Space, Time and Deity* (1920), as a mere scientific theory which avoids any evaluations of its object of investigation, but which delivers an essential explanation of how values are formed in human culture and, even more generally, in the history of life. Those creatures which have survived by natural selection or mutation under certain conditions are considered to be good so that the most survivable beings are worshipped as the top of the hierarchy (Alexander 1966:309-310). From a human point of view, the universe bears continuously higher *levels of existence* – matter, life, and mind:

> Within the all-embracing stuff of Space-Time, the universe exhibits an emergence in Time of successive levels of finite existences, each with its characteristic empirical quality. The highest of

Further protagonists in this debate are the Calvinistic botanist Asa Gray (1808-1888) with his *Darwiniana* (1876) and the geologist and preacher George Frederick Wright (1838-1921). See Benz 1965:157-183. Apart from these Christian interpretations, the English scientist Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913) advocated the spiritist idea that the future human being will transcend its corporeality and live as disembodied spirit. See Wallace 1953:291-320.

> these empirical qualities known to us is mind or consciousness. Deity is the next higher empirical quality to the highest we know … (Alexander 1966:345).

The highest level of existence which can be experienced by human beings, *mind* or *consciousness*, provides a stepping stone to the next level of cosmic evolvement:

> Deity is thus the next higher empirical quality to mind, which the universe is engaged in bringing to birth. (Alexander 1966:347)

Alexander assumes that there is no divine plan for evolution, but the *deity* is a part of the evolutionary process:

> Deity is some quality not realised but in process of realisation, is future and not present. (Alexander 1966:379)

For Alexander, god is an endless being within the space-time which is developing along with the history of the universe, and embodies all qualities of the universe which are not yet realized or cognizable (Alexander 1966:341-372):

> As actual, God does not possess the quality of deity but is the universe as tending to that quality. This nisus in the universe, though not present to our sense, is yet present to reflection upon experience (Alexander 1966:361).

Thus, the development of the universe driven by the *nisus* does not imply determinism but a strong teleological moment, since new and surviving beings in the history of evolution are always determined as superior (Baillie 1950:146-152; Emmert 1991:109-112).

It remains controversial to what extent the works of Alexander have influenced the ideas of the mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. Whitehead also endeavoured to understand the phenomena of the empirical world in accordance with the history of nature and cosmos, and to overcome the boundaries between sciences, humanities and philosophy. Basically, Whitehead drafts the image of a bipolar god who is characterized by a *primordial* and a *consequent* nature. Both natures of god strive to come together to re-establish the unity of god. He concludes that this dynamic god, in process of realizing his actuality, creates continuously new and higher forms of existence (Whitehead 1929:511-544).

> There are thus four creative phases in which the universe accomplishes its actuality. There is first the phase of conceptual origination, deficient in actuality, but infinite in its adjustment of valuation. Secondly, there is the temporal phase of physical origination, with its multiplicity of actualities. In this

> phase full actuality is attained; but there is deficiency in the solidarity of individuals with each other ... Thirdly, there is the phase of perfected actuality, in which the many are one everlastingly, without the qualification of any loss either of individual identity or of completeness of unity. In everlastingness, immediacy is reconciled with objective immortality … In the fourth phase, the creative action completes itself. … For the kingdom of heaven is with us today. The action of the fourth phase is the love of God for the world (Whitehead 1929:532-533).

This idea of a continuously evolving god had great influence on the formation of the Protestant process theology which began in the 1930s at the Chicago Divinity School (Maaßen 1991:217-219).

Bergson, Alexander and Whitehead, and later Teilhard, created systems of cosmological and evolutionary metaphysics as an extended interpretation of the empirical world depicted by the sciences. These briefly summarized ideas of Bergson, Alexander and Whitehead represent the dominant structure of the religious and philosophical reception of evolutionism in the first half of the 20th century, reconciling the temporalized notion of the *great chain of being* with modern evolutionism. Figuratively, this is the "farmland" on which the ideas of Teilhard de Chardin, Marshall McLuhan, some New Age thinkers, and today's cyber philosophers have flourished, as far as they concern the question of evolution. McLuhan, Tipler, and Cobb explicitly refer to Bergson or Whitehead, and Cobb and Tipler even consider their own approach as a continuation of process theology or natural theology, whereas Pesce presumably receives the ideas of Teilhard more in the context of New Age philosophy. In spite of their differences in appropriating the notion of the noosphere, Pesce, Cobb and Tipler all find the emergence of the Internet and computer technology in our present time to be a sign of a new level of consciousness in the history of evolution that unifies humankind.

9 Enlightenment, the study of religion and the utopia of community

The emergence of the Internet in the 1990s has not been the first occurrence when people attributed community ideals to new communication technology. In his outstanding article *The Rise and Persistence of the Technological Community Ideal* Randy Conolly analyzes the history of technological innovations, demonstrating how the great channel constructions of the 17th and 18th centuries were regarded as a promising means for unifying all peoples and for banishing war and hostility. Later, the telegraph, railway, radio and television – so, the "magic channels" of Marshall McLuhan – were considered means of overcoming social disparity and hierarchies, and thereby supporting the perception of the true equality of all men (Connolly 2001). Here, the pattern of utopian interpretations is determined by a crucial project of the enlightenment: the equality and

community of all human beings. Thence, the religious reception of the Internet corresponds with secular interpretations such as the visions of the French media philosopher Pierre Lévy.[31] In his view, cyberspace is the metaphor of liberated and equal humanity realizing the prospects of enlightenment as a global collective intelligence (Lévy 2001:100). In a similar way, the sociologist Manuel Castells (*1942) envisioned noopolitics as a new type of democracy in a network society (Castells 2001).

Now, it is remarkable that the secular utopia of cyberspace adopts the same impulses that were the significant driving forces of the comparative study of religion in the 19th century. Initially, under the formative influence of philology, the comparison of languages were thought to suffice to illuminate the early history of peoples and finally reveal their common cultural origin. Here, Friedrich Schlegel's treatise *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* (1808) has been seminal. When, in the second half of 19th century the linguist Friedrich Max Müller (1821-1900) constituted the comparative study of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*), he regarded the new discipline as the completion of all history. The exploration of the cultural origin of men is, according to Müller, equal to the religious origin of men, and consequently the nature of religion would also reveal the nature of men (Gladigow 2005b:44-46):

> But more surprising than the continuity in the growth of language is the continuity in the growth of religion. Of religion, too, as of language, it may be said that in it everything new is old, and everything old is new, and that there has been no entirely new religion since the beginning of the world (Müller 2002:70).

For Müller, the book remained the dominant media paradigm of his time underlying the processes of cognition. The translation and comparison of the "holy scriptures" of humanity promised to uncover the core of all living and past religions. In doing so, Müller received the old, initially theological idea of the accumulation of knowledge (on god) which began with Vincent of Lérin's *Commonitorium* (ca. 434), continued in Francis Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* (1605), and influenced the succeeding doctrines of scientific and religious progress (Newton, Condorcet, Priestley). But Müller did think globally, considering the scriptures of religions as a divinely given network, of which only the total view will disclose the significance of its single elements (Müller 2002:70-79). It is not necessary, here, to explain the reception and continuation of this idea in the Parliament of the World's Religions (1893), the *Religiösen Menschheitsbund* initialized by Rudolf Otto, the works of Mircea Eliade, and many others (Lüddeckens 2002; Obergethmann 1998).

31 The postmodern media philosopher Pierre Lévy (*1956) holds the research chair for collective intelligence at Ottawa University in Canada. His work is deeply influenced by his mentor Felix Guattari.

In fact, concerning the question of the cultural and religious reception of the Internet, it is of great interest that this medium is received as a secular idea as well as a religious utopia of universal community. Pierre Lévy's conviction that the Internet will develop into a collective intelligence by the advancement of knowledge and reason converges with the religious notions of the noosphere proposed by Jennifer Cobb, Mark Pesce and others. The emergence of the Internet is considered to be the outstanding event in the history of evolution, indicating humanity's course from its divine (or however transcendent) origin to a Christian or more commonly spiritual community of the world. The contextualisation of this religious idea, founded in both Enlightenment and Christian thought, may raise the question whether (and in which way) there might be a religious reception of the Internet in other cultural hemispheres such as Japan, India or China.

According to the communication scientist Armand Mattelart, these post-modern utopias of an egalitarian *global village* have crucial implications for the construction of sense in our contingent societies overflowing with an unmanageable amount of information. They provide the illusion of a rural (*village*) or organic (*Gaia*) – religious or secular – global community, and they oppose the experienced loss of actual communities (Mattelart 1996:85-162, 304). The metaphors of Gaia, god and the Internet reflect some aspects of the current community ideal. To regard the Internet as the (most important) result of the evolutionary process exceeds the previous euphemisms welcoming new technologies in the past. The medium now becomes a part of a superior cosmic process, apparently unfettered by human influences. In an age that lacks one common myth, the medium itself becomes the master narrative – *die Meistererzählung* – of the media society.

However, a consideration of the history of the cultural reception of technological innovations, the recent debate on governmental and commercial spying activities on Internet users, and eventually the simple realisation that probably a third of the world's population never used a telephone,[32] may enable us to keep the necessary analytical distance in the study of religion and media.

32 In his millenium report, at that time UN General Secretary, Kofi Annan, refers to the metaphor of the global village but he clarifies that most "villagers" never made a phone call and have to fight with mere existential challenges (such as clean water, food, health care, education). See Annan 2000:16.

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Biography

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Virtual Religious Meetings, Actual Endogamy …

The Growing Success of Affinity Dating Sites

Pascal Lardellier

Abstract

Dating websites aiming to help singles find romantic and/or sexual partners have grown very rapidly over the last fifteen years. They bring together millions of single people –on average between a half and a third of a country's singles use or have used them.
A look at the history and evolution of these sites shows us that the first-generation "generalist" sites have given way to sites with an increasingly targeted "offer", be it on ethnic, religious or sociocultural criteria. These sites are now widespread, allowing singles to search one another out, on pre-established, explicitly communitarian grounds which are often religious. In France (the country where this study has been carried out), sites devoted to the Muslim community are very popular. For example, the Inch Allah and Mektoub websites are used by several hundred thousand people.
This evolution and the success of such websites raise a number of sociological questions. Based on a long-term study carried out by the author, looking into the dynamics of romantic encounters (2 books published in 2004 and 2012), this article will review the major findings and lines of enquiry (methodological, theoretical) into online romantic encounters on these dating websites, showing the respective positions of the sites, the strategies of the individuals online, and the societal questions involved.

Keywords

Internet, dating sites, sentimental and sexual relations, multiculturalism, endogamy

1 Does a multicultural society necessarily lead to mixed couples[1]?

It seems logical to imagine that multiculturalism and social mixing in our society lead to an increasingly strong heterogamy. Cross-cultural openness, tolerance, political and media condemnation of all racist discourses and postures all carry a strong ideological burden. And it is easy to think that our societies, which we like to think of as "melting pots", foster the increase of "cross-cultural couples". Ideally, these couples should be at the forefront of a "dialogue between cultures", the ultimate embodiment of an open society. Of course, cross-cultural couples are now numerous, and increasingly visible. But should one look a little further, a survey of singles looking for their "other half" and a structural analysis of the marriage market tend to show that endogamy and homogamy are still pre-eminent, as regards the motivations of those willing to be part of a couple. What do we mean here by endogamy? According to the classic definition, it is a sociological "law" by which we select partners belonging to the same social group, be it religious, social, professional, or ethnic.

We here present the results of two studies conducted on the same field, the "sentimental Net" (a term coined by Pascal Lardellier to encompass the plethora of heterosexual romantic and conjugal dating sites), the first conducted between 2002 and 2004, and the second between 2010 and 2012 (Lardellier 2004 & Lardellier 2012). The process of "computer-assisted endogamy" we witnessed on the Internet shows couples forming "online" by pairing singles who share ethnic and religious affinities (renamed "cultural affinities"), and more generally socio-economic and socio-cultural affinities. In the formation of couples, these endogamous criteria tend to prevail over choices which are never multicultural at first reading.

In fact, interracial couples who met on the Internet are the result of "intercontinental strategic alliances", which are profitable for both sides. On the one hand, upward social mobility (emigration towards a prosperous area, whatever the loss in terms of family and identity); on the other hand, the assurance of having a satisfying partner in terms of appearance. To put it bluntly, Western white males in their forties or fifties might "comb" Africa, for example, deliberately looking for youth, beauty and docility[2].

1 In this article we refer to mixed couples from the social, cultural, religious, or ethnic (etc.) point of view.

2 In Sex@mour (Armand Colin, 2010), Jean-Claude Kaufmann devotes a rather alarmist chapter to such transcontinental matrimonial migrations, made possible by online dating. These migrations throw off the conjugal balance and the system of values in place, while "merchandising" the actors (and especially the actresses) as well as the institution of marriage. In 2004 (*Le cœur Net, op. cit.*) we revealed this phenomenon that we qualified as the "Celibacy International". Furthermore, this has been exemplified by many press/TV reports and documentaries on the "Love cybercafés" of Africa.

Let's now go back to our studies, which were meant to question the part played by technological mediation in the evolution and reconfiguration of social relationships, and more precisely of sentimental and sexual relations. Of course, sociologists are now aware that a revolution is at work in digital networks, towards which former social logics are migrating, all the while adopting features specific to the technosphere. Taking this process as a postulate, a combination of methodologies has led us, since 2003, to survey this new field through participant observation. We also met and comprehensively interviewed some of the actors of this field, and collated these data with their relational and identity strategies. Very soon, the "microsociological" dimension of their accounts revealed the "macrosociological" dimension of the findings and of the major trends identified[3].

2 A still present and even pressuring endogamy

We can easily distinguish two different periods in the evolution of the online dating market: the first one, from roughly 1997 to 2006, is characterized by a kind of endogamy intuitively organised "upstream" by the clients themselves. As I noticed from 2002-2003 on, "intimate strangers" corresponding online on generalist dating sites tended to select by themselves people like them. For lack of a better term, I used to call this process the "ticking all the right boxes syndrome". Indeed, on dating sites we are represented by a "profile page" gathering marital status and sociocultural criteria, "the ASL" (age, sex, location), but also by a self-presentation explaining cultural tastes. Its style, spelling, references, etc., are all clues about one's personal status. For example: a secondary school teacher, passionate about the classics and Korean cinema, a vegetarian, animal lover and alter-globalization activist, would like to meet a man with exactly the same traits and as similar to herself as possible. Elisabeth, a 29 year-old teacher, registered on a dating site, bluntly puts it this way: "Online, I first look at the spelling. It may seem silly and unfair, but I immediately delete messages written in SMS language or emails full of spelling mistakes! Since I'm looking for someone with a certain cultural level, and the spelling really expresses the education level, as well as certain standards; it also expresses one's regard for other people, although they are still strangers. On the other hand, a man who uses a particular style and writes well in terms of form and content, attracts me and makes me want to go further, by writing back for a start."

3 The interviews referred to in this article were conducted in 2001, with the heads of the websites *Points-communs.com* and *Attractive World*; these interviews focused on their positioning, development strategies, public image (marketing, advertising and press) as regards their partners and clients. The article also refers to questionnaires to the users of these sites (130 online questionnaires). For further information on methodology and accounts, see *Les Réseaux du cœur. Sexe, amour et séduction sur Internet, op.cit*.

We are dealing here with an almost perfect symmetry in terms of sociocultural affinities. Thanks to its millions of profiles the Matrix, was calmly and mechanically able to regurgitate thirty or forty people corresponding more or less to the very specific request, all potential and virtual princes.

With regard to the second period, from around 2006 on, endogamy has been implemented by the economic actors of the market, i.e. “downstream” industrial managers and their marketing staff, in charge of the positioning of the websites. They simply answered a demand for dates “shortlisted” within cultural frameworks, which are thus still ethnic, sociocultural and religious. Cultural dating sites developed especially in the mid-Nineties, mostly denominational in nature. Examples include *Mektoub, Inch Allah* (for Muslim people), *Theotokos* (for Catholics), and *J Dream* (for Jews). Their growing success corresponds to a return to – or a retreat into – values related to one's ancestry and/or education. People openly admit the segregation process, and the argument for this is that the members gather and meet around “common values”, which are meant to facilitate the formation of new couples. Thus, dating sites that gather together a majority of Muslim people have thousands of members in France alone, drawing on and speeding up the process of identitarian closure around one's religious and/or ethnic community, currently at work in France. Malika, 33, says: “A single, unmarried, woman of my age, that's not normal for my parents, brothers or sisters. I devoted time to my studies, enjoyed my youth, and now, what am I supposed to do? And how? As with all of my friends, I had to resort to the Internet. I soon ran away from *Meetic*, for a whole bunch of intolerable reasons! Then, you try more selective sites, like *Points-communs* or *Attractive*. And finally you realise that while you're at it, you may as well put the emphasis on cultural values, thanks to which you will understand each other, agree on food, relations, celebrations, etc. That's why I chose *InchAllah*. It means that, there are fewer misunderstandings and fewer disappointments.” Atef, 32, agrees: “You're young, you live in France, you have a dual Franco-Tunisian culture, and then comes the time to “settle down”. Once you've had your fun, you think about founding a family, and here come family pressures as well as your own aspirations. And you realise that meeting a woman with the same references, the same culture and the same values as yourself, makes it much easier to understand one another. You save time and share something strong, you've actually got the same roots. That's why, after trying non-specialist websites, you naturally (and logically) register on websites visited by people of your own religion”.

Cédric, a 42 year old widower, registered on Theotokos for the same reasons: “After living through that terrible tragedy, there was the long and painful mourning period. And once I thought about family and marriage again, I really didn't want to flirt around or enjoy myself and try to forget, as people advised me to. That's the reason why people go on sites guaranteeing seriousness and shared culture and values”.

Endogamy has always been powerful, but with the "industrialisation" of dating and the hyper-targeting made possible by the Internet, it is further strengthened. We know that the republican model is stretched, torn between the will to recognise and respect "cultural" disparities (with specific claims on their behalf as backdrop) and the basic principle that nobody should be different in terms of rights and obligations.

But new specific websites have also emerged, now allowing vegetarians, right-wingers (or left-wingers), the elderly, single parents, etc., to meet someone within their community of interest or their social segment. Designers of such dating sites always keep in mind that the registered members wish above all to meet people like them, sharing their values and concerns.

The online dating supply is thus evolving more and more towards a niche logic. We witness a hyper-segmentation of the market, with websites based on cultural, professional, ethnic (e.g. websites gathering people of colour with an African background), or political affinities, as well as websites where the only point of mutual interest between members relates to an eccentric way of life.

It is a tell-tale of our times that there are websites specifically targeting good-looking people, such as *BeautifulPeople*, or rich people, such as *Match Platinum* or *A Small World*.

3 Social interference from "match-makers" to Meetic

Speaking about endogamy and matrimonial mediation, it would be a mistake to believe that the Internet opened the age of sentimental and conjugal intercession. The Internet goes a long way towards mechanising former practices. In fact, in most societies and at all times, in different contexts, some people had the occupation of pairing lonely souls, like the "*marieuses*", matchmakers in *Ancien Regime* France. Clearly, societies have always had efficient go-betweens, like the *marieuses*, or notaries, or family friends playing the role of wise mediators. Similarly, balls and upper-class parties inculcated specific codes of behaviour, such as by initiating people into social ballroom dancing. All this was meant to bring young people of the same social standing closer together. For a long time, the aim of this pairing logic has been a question of pragmatically maintaining familiar and notarial interests, "working things out in the best possible way". Love came (or not), and we all well know that literature is full of tales about marriages of convenience. In some way, love is the surprise guest of contemporary couples.

But in view of the outburst in the number of singles and the advent of a mass individualistic society, the Internet is a relationship Eldorado, making up for a crisis in the relationship area. Some

of the traditional contexts for dating have declined, and have recently been replaced by a new generation of technical and commercial intermediaries, such as speed-dating.

4 Dating sites, a short but rich history

In the French-speaking world, the first era of online dating (1997-2004) was embodied by *Netclub*, *Amoureux.com*, *Match* and then *Meetic*, which, from 2003 on, played a huge part in legitimizing and encouraging computer assisted dating. During the first years of social and technical experimentation, dating sites used to be general in nature, and many of them remain so ten years later. But we must not forget that we are dealing with a market, and that designers and investors want to meet the expectations upstream, at the supply level. Of all the basic rules governing the marriage market, what we are focusing on here is endogamy, and this "homophily", which consists in "loving people like us". This was not taken into account by the first era of dating sites, and generalist sites still look like "Walmart of the lonely hearts". But we realised that even there, love may be masked but is certainly not blind.

Dating sites were born in the US where, traditionally, there is no shame in placing ads in newspapers in order to meet new friends or to strike up acquaintances when arriving in a new town. Since 1995 (with *Match.com*), they naturally perpetuated this American tradition using the new means offered by the Internet. Dating sites for singles developed experimentally while the Internet was in its infancy. They are based on a simple principle: you register on a site of your choice, men pay monthly fees, while women rarely do, in order to counterbalance disparities between genders[4].

You then choose a "nickname" (often conformist and mediocre, acknowledged or not), fill in your profile with civil data and photos, you list your hobbies and interests, topped by a short personal text that is supposed to express who you are and what you want. After that, your digital self can now be sought, and you can join in the fun.

5 Online, Cupid is anything but blind

Once registered, you can take advantage of a range of services, like consulting thousands of profiles, among which you choose potentially interesting people, according to predefined personal

4 It is important that the number of men and women (we are here talking about heterosexual sites) be more or less equal, in order to give the impression that, in this case, men are not over-represented. It is clear that this is a strategic element for these sites, which officially announce a strict balance of "present forces".

criteria like age, region, and declared expectations. And that is when – to return to the topic in hand – an inclination toward endogamy comes to the fore. For even on generalist sites, when the search becomes "serious" and the approach "committed" (i.e. sentimental and conjugal, and not only sexual), users have a propensity to "spontaneously" contact people like themselves, from an ethnic, religious and sociocultural point of view. There are two means of contacting people. Asynchoronous communication means writing emails they will receive in their mailbox, and to which they can answer (or not). Synchronous communication, means contacting potential partners directly by live chat, trying to start an ongoing exchange with somebody online among thousands of requests for live conversations. During "chat sessions", the webcam definitely plays an important role, as users can see each other, and thus judge whether the person corresponds to their quest, depending on physical and sartorial (when clothed) criteria, or sometimes their tastes in interior design, depending on the domestic environment visible in the shot.

Potentially, everybody can reach out to everybody. And nothing stops you from writing simultaneously to dozens or hundreds of people, thanks to features like "copy/paste" and "sample messages", which can be duplicated and sent to many potential partners. This frequently happens, and many users complain about it and warn the readers of their profile about their dislike of "an industrialisation of first contact". In any case, in this virtual "non-place" traditional and social rules (interaction rituals, politeness rituals, etc.) are abolished. Disembodiment allows all freedoms and removes all inhibitions. Nevertheless, implicit sociological laws operate on the Internet, so that you would not foolishly message just "anybody". To repeat, first contact and approach logics are sociologically organised. Despite disembodiment and anonymity, and despite the fact that marital status is momentarily suspended, everything is organised by the market and the actors themselves so that each person meets "people like him/herself". The Internet reproduces and even accentuates social stratification. To recall an obvious point: digital networks essentially contain written text. Now, these texts definitely and mercilessly say who we are and from where we speak, through their style, spelling, language registers and the way they deal with shared (or not) cultural references. The "sentimental Net" is a discriminatory device, as it forces people to write, to find the words, to spell correctly, to master different language registers as well as implicit and explicit categories, etc. Now, through the writing test, many users guess who they are dealing with. Of course, cultural references, passions and hobbies listed on the profile page help to determine what kind of person "the masked interlocutor" is.

6 Digital writing as a powerful sociocultural discriminating factor

As often in real life, meeting “someone to love on the Internet” brings us closer to people who are sociologically similar to us. Far from the pipe dream suggesting that the Internet is a tool for a new form of social mixing, we are actually witnessing a process of “computer assisted endogamy”, from an ethnic, religious, social and professional point of view. A survey carried out between 2005 and 2008[5] shows that, in one year, only 7% of users met new people on the Web. Concerning relationships that develop on the Internet, 91% are from the same country, and 22% from the same town. Moreover, people usually studied similar things, are the same age and have the same cultural references. We then return to the concept of “computer assisted endogamy”.

The Internet is a carnivalesque space, where everybody can freely speak to people whose mask they like. Anonymity, role plays and identity strategies determine self-presentation. And yet, when dealing with these dating sites, Eva Illouz (2006) refers to a Cartesian and “ontic self.” This forces users to take a step back from what they are, and to define a profound and permanent identity, i.e. an “essence” dissociated from the body. Of course, this absent, virtual “online” body is paradoxically of great importance. As the economy of appearances, ruling users' presence on these websites, means that all personal photos must be attractive in order to attract visits, buzz and comments. This leads to an over-enhancement of self, thanks to photoshopped pictures, or at least pictures that are somewhat more attractive than reality. But such photos not only show bodies, but also lifestyle in the form of clothes, personal grooming, environments framed in the background and sets of poses and postures. Combined with textual self-expression, such images help define “from where we speak” from asocial point of view.

We know that powerful sociological filters are at work on the Internet, and they are at the heart of the dating stage actors' strategies. Another survey, commissioned by the website *Attractive World*, confirms that the education level is an important search criterion[6]. Women and men interviewed are unanimous: for people with high education level, this latter criterion is determining in the search for The One (85% for women and 69% for men). Both genders would prefer partner with the same education level (72% for women, 61% for men), and they would all more easily accept a partner with higher qualifications than lower. Women graduates even think that they “scare” men: two in five explain that they are still single because of their educational level. To come back to the topic in hand: digital networks mainly contain writings, which reinforce social stratifications, with respect to implicit and explicit discrimination generated by this content. The market for dating sites is continuing to evolve in this direction, resulting in hypersegmentation. In

5 Survey conducted by Virginie Lethiais and Karine Roudaut, from Télécom-Bretagne (France).
6 Internal study, entrusted to the researcher in strict confidence and for information purpose.

love, people have long looked for their other half; now it seems that we are rather looking for our double, as if reflected in a mirror.

7 To conclude, “birds of a feather….”

The purpose of this survey is to recall that dating sites are “socio-technical devices” which are more likely to produce endogamy than to encourage a hypothetical social mixing. In any case, they constitute the epitome of a “liquid” modernity (Bauman 2003). And after all, the Internet is for surfing! We must also remember that this is a paradox in a world that advocates multiculturalism as a cardinal social value. In fact, the process of identitarian closure at work in our society is perceptible in the players' and users' strategies, but also upstream, in the positioning of the owners and marketers of these sites. Behind the sharing of “cultural” values extolled as a commercial argument hiding a (mainly religious) basic axiology, an active endogamy is at work, now “computer-assisted”. Of course, a process of social mixing is also perceptible on the fringe of the market and is basically the result of international social mobility strategies. Here at the fringe, we can see the kind of multiculturalism described at the beginning of this article; it allows mixing (from the social and cultural point of view) in transcontinental matrimonial migrations, but these do not, however, represent a norm. And this mixing is only possible when the members of the couple are not attached to their original culture, or when one of the two is willing to adopt the other's culture, in the manner of a religious conversion.

But the reality is that even online, former logics remain and become stronger: homophily, endogamy and a primacy of “sociocultural affinities”. So, to recall an old proverb, on the Internet the saying “birds of a feather flock together” makes much more sense than “opposites attract”.

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Biography

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Going Online and Taking the Plane. From San Francisco to Jerusalem.

The Physical and Electronic Networks of "Jewish Mindfulness"

Mira Niculescu

Abstract

In this article, I analyze the emergence of a new hybrid practice within American Judaism: "Jewish mindfulness". Jewish mindfulness is a new meditation practice inspired from "mindfulness meditation", a westernized form of Buddhist meditation.

I look at the role played in the Internet in the rapid success and in the geographical unfolding of this new practice within the transnational English speaking Jewish religious networks.

First, I retrace the emergence of the practice of Jewish mindfulness and the role played by Internet in this process. Second, I focus on the genealogical and geographical structure of today's Jewish mindfulness networks. Finally, through focusing comparatively on two groups offering the practice of "Jewish mindfulness", I show how the Internet becomes the surface of expression of hybrid discourses that are not necessarily expressed as such.

In conclusion I suggest that electronic networks can be used to support, rather than to replace "offline" religious connections.

Keywords

Buddhism, Judaism, mindfulness, hybridity, lineage, transnational networks, diaspora

In May of 2009, from a Parisian office, I went online to take a look at the websites of Buddhist centers in America. In the context of my sociological fieldwork on the "Jewish Buddhists" (Niculescu 2014), I was trying to evaluate the proportion of Jewish-born teachers in this environment, to detect in advance my future interlocutors, and also to see if there was any tentative synthesis between Judaism and Buddhism wasn't showing up in the programs.

Among all the "salvation good" suppliers that have a presence on the web today, I was able, within a few clicks, to get remotely and preemptively a quite consistent panoramic view of this vast field.

This is when the serendipity of web surfing came into play: on the website of *Spirit Rock Meditation Center (SRMC)* <http://www.spiritrock.org/> was published the announcement of an upcoming "'Jewish mindfulness' retreat". I had never heard of such a practice, and for a reason: this retreat was the first of its kind. Curious of what seemed like a possible first doctrinal crystallization of the phenomenon of the "Jewish Buddhists", I took a flight to San Francisco a few months later to attend this retreat as a participatory observer.

I didn't know yet- nor did its organizers- that the expression "Jewish mindfulness", then published *ad hoc* for the first time on a website, was about to become a new label in the American Jewish religious field.

By offering the example of the very fast fashioning of a new practice within a "historic religion" like Judaism, "Jewish mindfulness" constitutes a privileged case study to observe the role of the internet in the making of Religion.

It is on this aspect that I will focus here, as part of a reflection on the impact of electronic practices on "lived religion". In particular, I wish to show how this practice has developed as a twofold network: by the simultaneous weaving of an electronic network and of a human transnational network.

First I will retrace the emergence of "Jewish mindfulness" and the role internet played in this process. Second I will examine the genealogical and spatial structure of the networks of "Jewish mindfulness". Third, through a content analysis of the online visual and textual discourses, I will show how the Internet becomes the space of expression of hybridities that are not necessarily expressed as such.

1 The role of the internet in the emergence of "Jewish mindfulness"

The concept of "Jewish mindfulness" appeared in practice before it started developing institutionally, in great part via the Internet.

1.1 A “Jewish mindfulness” retreat: the birth of a hybrid

The Buddhist center in which the first “Jewish mindfulness” retreat was taking place teaches “Insight meditation”, a Western version of the *Vipassana* (“penetrating vision”) meditation technique taught in Theravada Buddhism[1]. Founded by Burmese monks U Ba Khin and Mayasi Sayadaw in a spirit of modernist reform influenced by Western culture (see Baumann 2001, p.3; Fronsdal 1998, p.165), and popularized by Satya Narayan Goenka who gave it its international dimension, the Vipassana school claims to represent one of the most ancient Buddhist meditation techniques, coming back to the time of the Buddha himself <https://www.spiritrock.org/meditation>.

“Insight meditation”, its American version, was fashioned in the seventies by a group of Buddhist Jews freshly back from years of monastic training in Asia. It can thus be described as the Western translation of a globalized Asian neo-traditionalism that was already westernized. Its success in America (Fronsdal 1998 precit) comes in great part from the fact that it is maximally stripped of the ritualistic aspects of Theravada Buddhism, and that it focalizes on the ‘universal’ concept of ‘mindfulness’.

In its structure, the retreat I was attending in the summer of 2009 was almost identical as those usually offered at Spirit Rock. The only difference consisted in a few adjustments, aimed at alleviating its strictness, and –especially- its Buddhist character. These concerned mainly the schedule: the retreat lasted seven and not ten days, the day started later and ended earlier, and most of all, a daily time for collective prayer[2] and for ‘Torah yoga’ <http://torahyoga.com/page1-what-how-content.htm> had been introduced, opportune distractions to the harshness of a schedule otherwise entirely dedicated to meditation. Through this process the religious[3] ‘flavor’ that was underlying the meditation practice had slid seamlessly towards a thematic substitution: the Buddhist references had been erased and Jewish ones introduced.

This is how the walls of Spirit Rock had seen the disappearance, the space of a week, of the Buddha statues usually enthroned in its common spaces, while *kippot*[4] had made their appearance on the heads of many participants and *kashrut*[5] standards were observed in the kitchen.

Such a hybrid formula between ‘eastern’ practices (Buddhism and yoga) and Judaism (prayers and references to Torah in the discourses) was designed to make the practice of ‘insight

1 The ‘old vehicle”, as it is considered as one of the oldest Buddhist schools.
2 The kaddish or ‘sanctification”, a central prayer in jewish liturgy, was recited every morning.
3 In as much as Buddhism can be discussed in the context of organized religion.
4 The kippa is the Jewish ritualistic round hat usually worn by men- but also in liberal circles by women.
5 Kashrut refers to the dietary laws in Judaism.

meditation' accessible to a Jewish audience, in a frame as respectful as possible of the demands of *halakha*[6].

However in this case, the step towards the religious neutralization of Buddhism was a small one to take: except for the Buddha statues, that may have seemed for some to contravene to the prohibition of idolatry[7], there was nothing in the practice offered at Spirit Rock, that would have seemed incompatible with the symbolic boundaries of a Jewish frame. Even more so, it was the very nature of this type of 'debuddhaized Buddhism' proposed in this Western meditation center that had made such an arrangement possible.

Conceived as a first try, this retreat met with unforeseen success. It was reiterated the year after, and the year after that. Today one can count about ten retreats a year based on the same model, from the Californian coast to the Galilean hills in Israel.

While five years ago, the expression 'Jewish mindfulness' was non-existent, today, one just needs to type it in a search engine to find instantaneously a thousand results referring to blogs and articles on the topic, but also, more concretely, to websites of groups offering this practice on a transnational level. What role exactly has played the Internet in the genesis of such a practice?

1.2 The role of online communication in the making of offline religion

The main characteristic of the Internet as a communication tool is that it offers immediate information, to a larger audience, and at virtually no cost. This enables new groups to come to existence without a pre-established institutional frame: all that is required is to create a web page, to present a practice, and to announce an upcoming meeting. The group then meets punctually in an *ad-hoc* place- most of the time lent by a Jewish or Buddhist institution. If the public shows up, the collective is launched. It can then spread out and consolidate itself as the participations turn into adhesions- that is, into financial support.

The Internet also stands as a symbolic space for groups that don't have a permanent institutional anchor. Such is the case of the *Awakened Heart project* <http://www.awakenedheartproject.org/>, or of *Or ha lev* <http://orhalev.org/> two projects which don't dispose of a permanent place, but which founders and teachers circulate internationally to teach within the transnational English speaking Jewish community.

But just like the difficulties met by the start-ups of the two thousands era, these new doxopraxic[8] enterprises are frail: they can collapse as fast as they appeared. The reason is that they

6 Jewish law.
7 Prohibited in the 2nd and 3rd commandments of the Pentateuch.
8 From *doxa*: doctrine, and *praxis*: practice, the term "doxopraxic" serves to designate systems of thought and

are based on the principle of punctual participation rather than on a system of affiliation, and for some, on the principle of donation rather than of fee charging. Hence, their financial stability is never granted, and depends greatly on external funding.

The end of a funding can therefore challenge the viability of a group, as shows the fate of the *Jewish Meditation Center* (JMC) <http://www.jmcbrooklyn.org/> of Brooklyn. Funded in 2008 by two students who had discovered "Jewish meditation" in retreats such as the one described above, the JMC had appeared from scratch on the landscape of a Jewish New York scene that was thirsty for spirituality and in demand for a 'home version' of 'meditation'.

This new institution had appeared without any investment funds, but rather carried by the enthusiastic pedagogical and material support of their elders: Jewish Buddhist teachers spread out between Connecticut and California. Yet in 2013 the JMC had to let its director go: after the departure of her cofounder and a solo management by the remaining one, the group wasn't able to develop financially in a sustainable manner. The JMC since became more grassroots than ever: it is now run collectively by volunteering members - but for how long?

These institutional hazards don't inhibit the exponential blooming of new groups over the past few years, which call themselves alternatively 'Jewish mindfulness' <http://Jewishmindfulness.net/> 'Jewish meditation' <http://adasisrael.org/jmcw/> or 'Contemplative Judaism' <http://www.awakenedheartproject.org/> but which all offer the same type of practice: a meditation practice based on the import of mindfulness meditation within a Jewish frame. Let us now take a look at the human networks through which these practices unfolded.

2 The physical networks of "Jewish mindfulness": genealogical and spatial structure of a transnational practice

The 'flesh and blood' aspect of the 'Jewish mindfulness' networks is twofold: it refers first, to the human networks that constituted it, and second, to the transnational networks by which they spread out geographically.

practice.

2.1 The genealogical structure: a network of lineages

French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger uses as the criteria of the constitution of a religious group, the concept of "believing lineage [9]" (1999, pp. 23-24). Such a structuralist view, because it superposes the notion of "religion" to that of "tradition", seems to open a category too vast to be operational in terms of the definition of "religion". However it remains particularly useful to show its genesis: the concept of "believing lineage" takes all its relevance at the level of the observation of 'religion in the making': a dynamics particularly representative of the contemporary Western religious field.

By making the 'religious' qualification of a practice depend on the notion of 'transmission', the concept of 'believing lineage' facilitates the distinction, within the religious productions of modernity, between ephemeral phenomena and emerging new religious groups. In the case that interests us here, this concept helps distinguish between the phenomenon of the 'Jewish Buddhists', whose individual *bricolages* remain circumscribed to their religious autobiographies (Niculescu 2012) and the constitution of 'Jewish mindfulness', which has become a collective religious practice.

More precisely, these two objects are articulated chronologically, the second being considered as a properly 'religious' consequence of the first, of which it constitutes a specific crystallization (Niculescu 2015 forthcoming).

It is the observation in real time of the constitution of doxopraxic lineages of 'Jewish mindfulness' that enabled me to identify, within the span of three years, the transformation of a summer 'one shot' into a proper new religious label within American Judaism.

If one applies the concept of 'network' to that of 'lineage', it is possible to say that a lineage is a vertical network. In the case of 'Jewish mindfulness', this network rapidly grew horizontal as the transversal connections were growing in complexity -between generations but also between a lineage and the next.

The network of lineages of 'Jewish mindfulness' takes its source at two Buddhist stems: the 'Insight meditation' school originating from the *theravadin vipassana* tradition which we described earlier, and the Japanese Zen school belonging to the Mahayana tradition[10].

To use the terminology of transnational networks framed by French anthropologist Nathalie Luca (2012, p.68), the 'head of lineage' of the first stem is Jewish Buddhist teacher Sylvia Boorstein. Cofounder of Spirit Rock and co-leader of the first retreat in 2009, Boorstein can be

9 "Lignée croyante" in French.
10 The 'large vehicle', which advocates for a form of 'liberation' (*nirvana*) that would be more altruistic because collective.

considered as the grandmother of 'Jewish mindfulness': it is she who took the initiative of training her Jewish fellows in the dharma- and in particular rabbis from various liberal denominations, who, when later on systematizing the application of 'mindfulness' to the Jewish doxopraxis, have finalized the concept of 'Jewish mindfulness'.

The second stem sprouts from the American Zen tradition, heir of Japanese masters DT. Suzuki and Suzuki Roshi. It emerged through the collaboration of a Jewish Buddhist teacher, Zoketzu Norman Fischer (2002) and a former Zen student who became a conservative rabbi, Alan Lew (1999). In 2000, these two old friends founded in San Francisco a meditation group geared towards a Jewish audience: *makor or*: 'source of light' and a meditation place within a synagogue: *makom sholom*, 'place of peace' <http://www.bayjews.org/DETAIL.aspx?ID=4081>.

It is however important to specify that if the current actors take inspiration from these two stems, it is only from the first one that "Jewish mindfulness" emerged.

The second generation of teachers of "Jewish mindfulness" is constituted by the first generation of rabbis formed by Boorstein; especially Reconstructionist rabbi Jeff Roth, teacher in the 2009 retreat, and conservative rabbi Jonathan Slater, author of *Mindful Jewish living* (2004).

The third generation, of which the previously cited JMC is a pioneer, is constituted of younger Jews born in the eighties. Neither 'professional' Buddhists nor rabbis, they have taken the initiative of opening horizontal spaces of practice in order to fill the lack of institutions offering meditation in a Jewish frame on a regular basis. By creating weekly meetings, at first informal, to fix these 'structural gaps' of a practice that was still in its first steps, this generation of 'amateur meditators', strongly carried by electronic networks, has contributed to the development of the physical networks by accruing the density of local anchors.

Finally, a third lineage has appeared in parallel with the second generation. It is lead by young rabbis of various denominations[11] but coming from similar trajectories: by contrast with the rabbis of the second generation which have later become teachers of 'Jewish mindfulness', they started their path by exploring independently the dharma, and more eclectically so, before engaging in the rabbinic path. They are more engaged with Buddhism than the second generation, and more engaged with Judaism than the third. The teachers of *Or Ha Lev*, that I already mentioned, or of the 'Jewish mindfulness center of Chicago', that I will describe in a moment, are representative of this generation.

Hence, within the space of two generations, we find ourselves very far from the 'total' engagement of the founders of 'insight meditation', who had embraced for years the demanding path of Buddhist monasticism in Asia.

11 From orthodox at the far 'right' to *Reconstructionist* at the far left via the *Conservative* in the center.

The weaving of these lineages operated in two directions: vertical, via a process of genealogical transmission from teacher to student, and horizontal, via a process of collaboration between peers.

However often, these two dynamics are cumulated, since the teachers don't hesitate to raise their students to the status of co-teachers in order to spread their practice faster. The horizontal development of these practices on a networking mode tempers the vertical and hierarchical dimension of the lineage they stem from.

Moreover, the actors don't describe themselves as forming any kind of lineage -and for a reason: everything, in the transmission of the teaching authority of 'Jewish mindfulness', is informal. There are no rules, nor transmission rites. On the contrary, the friendship ties and the reciprocity of roles – especially when one is a rabbi and the other a jewish Buddhist teacher- that unite the actors, blur the hierarchies so much so that initiators and initiated, in the absence of a sufficient pool of teachers, often find each other rapidly teaching on equal footing -and this notwithstanding the important discrepancies of training between them, in one area or the other.

This fraternal 'informality-horizontality' at the core of the transmission knots of 'Jewish mindfulness' sharply contrasts with the strictly hierarchical character of the notion of lineage within Buddhism, a notion accentuated by the passage rites of 'teaching authorization' and 'dharma transmission'.

2.2 The spatial structure: the 'almost diasporic' networks of 'Jewish mindfulness'

The networks of 'Jewish mindfulness' connect groups located mostly in large metropolitan areas of North America (San Francisco- Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia Washington, Boston), and in Israel between Jerusalem and the Galilee (figure 1 below).

These zones constitute the local outposts of the networks, or its 'bridge actors' (Luca, p.66): they connect the network on a local level. By contrast, the India of Buddhist meditation centers, and especially Dharamsala[12], constitutes not an outpost but rather an 'initiatory point': it is the indirect locus of the genesis of 'Jewish mindfulness', as it is the place many teachers of 'Jewish mindfulness' went through in order to deepen their practice of the *dharma*[13].

Each group is linked to the others by cooperation links, and as the meditation retreats multiply and the actors circulate, the circulations along the lines of the network are growing in complexity.

12 Residence in exile of the Dalaï Lama, head of the Gelugpa Tibetan lineage.
13 The teaching of the Buddha. What common language understands as 'Buddhism' is called 'dharma' by its more serious practitioners.

Figure 1: Map of the 'Jewish mindfulness' networks.

The topography of 'Jewish mindfulness' thus describes the mobile networks of a traveling practice. As a testimony of this, along my research fieldwork, I found myself meeting in New York or Jerusalem the same actors previously encountered in Dharamsala or San Francisco.

The circle formed by the transnational network of 'Jewish mindfulness' seems to follow the lines of the contemporary western Jewish diaspora. Only the networks of the new Jewish meditation aren't organized on a diasporic mode: they are not the fruit of migrations and exile from a motherland. Omnipresent in the Jewish liturgy, Jerusalem is neither a primordial geographic pole nor a central reference in the discourses of 'Jewish mindfulness'. Are we then in the presence of a network deprived of a center, in the image of its spreading on the web?

It doesn't seem so: a recent dynamic of institutionalization- centralization of the practice is pointing towards a specific topographical zone: the North East of the United States:

Founded in New York in 1999, the Institute of Jewish Spirituality has been offering over the past three years a '"Jewish mindfulness" teacher training". Many other workshops and retreats of "Jewish mindfulness" are being held in the only Jewish "retreat center" in America, Isabella Freedman <http://isabellafreedman.org/> a place dedicated since 1990 to Jewish spirituality together with biological agriculture and farming. The presence of these two key institutional poles, as well as the recent multiplication of "Jewish mindfulness" groups around the state of New York, are factors that tend to indicate that the East coast has taken the lead from the San Francisco area- which was its crib- as the 'knot actor' (Luca 2012, p.66), that is to say as the neuralgic center of 'Jewish mindfulness'.

Hence the a-topography of Internet networks shouldn't make us forget that the reality they point to is a progressively organized specific space revolving around a center, geographically as well as symbolically -which is the case for any practice in the process of its institutionalization.

Internet also plays another role in the making of this new practice: in the process of being displayed on the web, the discourses develop and the websites become autonomous spaces of religious expression and experience.

3 The electronic discourses of 'Jewish mindfulness': interactivity and hybridity

The characteristics of Internet communication have an impact on the lived practice of 'Jewish mindfulness', on two levels: on the one hand, by increasing the interactivity, the websites intensify the dialogue, and thus the horizontality between the religious supply and demand; on the other hand, the unfolding of visual and textual discourses on the Internet highlights the founding hybridity that seems to be formulating the definition of this new practice.

3.1 Textual communication on the Internet: an increased interactivity

The contents of the websites are first and foremost informational. They enable the web surfer to find the place and time of the practices he is interested in, to be informed of the one time events and recurring retreats, but also, thanks to external links by which the websites refer to each other, to constitute for oneself a personal overview of the general offer in 'Jewish mindfulness' that unfolds between the united states and Israel.

This personal dimension is accentuated with the new generation of more interactive platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, through which the teachers can talk more directly to their audience via posts that the recipients can in turn 'follow', 'like' and even 'comment'.

The interactivity then is almost direct, not only on a spatial-temporal level but also symbolically: in terms of encounter between the religious supply and its consumers.

But the websites of 'Jewish mindfulness' are also places of discourse in and of themselves: the surfer is being offered a whole battery of online teachings: articles, 'daily thoughts', podcasts of chanted prayers and guided meditations, etc, all of which constitute an extensive electronic pedagogical field.

By way of his, the websites become autonomous spaces for the deepening of the practice of 'Jewish mindfulness', fit for playing an interim role in between the off line encounters. For the researcher, they also constitute an ideal observation laboratory of hybridity in action.

3.2 Visual communication on the Internet: observing hybridity in action

In short, the concept of 'Jewish mindfulness' simply refers to the process of importing the Buddhist meditation technique called 'mindfulness' within a Jewish frame. 'Jewish mindfulness' can thus be defined as a process of translation-absorption of Buddhist concepts within the doxopraxical Jewish system. Two modalities of hybridity appear:

According to the first one, the practice of meditation is being inserted within the frame of a religious Jewish practice. An ideal-typical example of this is the innovation introduced by late rabbi Alan Lew, who had started in his conservative synagogue in San Francisco, before religious services, a meditation space conceived after the model of Zen practice <http://www.bethsholomsf.org/worship-and-spirituality/makom-sholom-meditation-practice.html>.

This modality describes a form of *bricolage* that could be connected to the mode of alternation or 'cut' proposed by French anthropologist Roger Bastide (1955): Buddhist meditation and Jewish prayer belong to two distinct physical and temporal spaces which are being chronologically and thematically articulated. Only in our case, the switching is not dissociated, but complementary: the first aims at preparing spiritually for the second.

A second modality of hybridity consists in the symbolic translation of Jewish practices in the light of Buddhist concepts. This is manifested for instance in the requalification of Jewish blessings (*brakhot*) into mindfulness practices. This modality would refer to the modality of 'reinterpretation', the most basic form of syncretic work (Mary 1999).

To illustrate this very elementary typology, I will take two examples from the discourses displayed on the websites of two 'Jewish mindfulness' groups: the Awakened Heart project (AHP) and the Center for Jewish Mindfulness (CJM).

By aiming at "the integration of mindfulness together with the study of Jewish texts" (<http://Jewishmindfulness.net/>) the CJM seems to be implementing a type of hybridity on the alternation mode. But hybridity also operates on the level of 'reinterpretation': the Jewish texts are being read through a lens that is being informed by the ethics of 'mindfulness', that is to say, by the Buddhist philosophy it is being taken from.

By contrast, the AHP seems to be implementing a type of hybridity built on the mode of 'reinterpretation'(<http://www.awakenedheartproject.org/>):

Jewish meditation (…) provides the wisdom to understand the nature of mind including those factors of mind that tend to obscure clear seeing. The practice teaches us how to direct our attention into the present moment of experience

If we compare the terminology used here to the one displayed on the website of Spirit Rock, the Buddhist school at which the founder of the AHP was trained, the similarity is striking (<https://www.spiritrock.org/meditation>)

> The practice concentrates and calms the mind. It allows one to see through the mind's conditioning and thereby to live more fully present in the moment (…). The practice develops clarity of seeing.

In both cases, it is about 'concentration', 'present moment', 'understanding the mind' and attaining 'clear vision' ('insight'). The difference appears at the level of the aim of the practice: while the Buddhist conception, expressed by Spirit Rock, is to 'put an end to suffering via the discovery of an unconditional and total freedom', the AHP states that the ultimate goal of meditation is to 'make the experience of the divine'.

This allows us to formulate another definition of 'Jewish mindfulness': this new practice can be described as a theistic application of the Buddhist concept of mindfulness; a practice via which meditation becomes a mystical pathway to the divine.

'Jewish mindfulness' can thus be described as a new hybrid technology within the liturgical Jewish apparel, aiming at a direct encounter with God- an encounter even more direct than prayer, because beyond words, rather lying in the depths of the intimate individual experience of life.

In these two examples, – as in the vast majority of cases, there is no express mention of a hybridity that is yet obvious in practice.

This can be attributed to two reasons: on the one hand the desire of affirming an autonomy of 'Jewish mindfulness' by affirming the 'universality' of the concept of 'mindfulness'; on the other hand the fear of losing a Jewish audience concerned with avoiding 'idolatry'. This tendency to silence the Buddhist sources of 'Jewish mindfulness' has been denounced by some observers, as in this online article entitled "Judaism, meditation and the B word" (Jay Michaleson 2005, <http://forward.com/articles/3652/judaism-meditation-and-the-b-word/>).

These reservations may explain why hybridity is often more eloquent in images than in words. To use again our two previously comparative examples:

The letters forming the logo of the CJM are suggesting the silhouette of a lotus flower, the symbol of Buddhism (figure 2) <http://Jewishmindfulness.net/>.

Figure 2: Logo of the center for Jewish mindfulness of Chicago.

In another style, the visual of the AHP shows the photograph of a man sitting in the 'lotus seated pose', the classic Buddhist meditation posture, but wearing a tallit, the Jewish prayer shawl (Figure 3) <http://www.awakenedheartproject.org/>.

Figure 3: Logo of the awakened heart Project

Hence, a proper discursive landscape is emerging on the Internet, as the websites are growing in content. Notwithstanding, these electronic resources keep referring to offline practices, which they view themselves as 'introductions to' rather than as 'substitutes for'.

It is the lived practice that matters in 'Jewish mindfulness', and the meditation retreats are its flesh and bones. Hence the websites in this case are not their own end constitutive of a type of alternative 'virtual religiosity', as is the case of part of online religion (see for instance Duteil-Ogata, 2015, and Jonveaux 2015) but rather a communication space that serves as a preamble to physical encounters.

4 Conclusion

Within the space of five years, the term 'Jewish mindfulness' has become a proper label within American Judaism. This transformation is attested by a growing electronic visibility, the appearance of generic practices, the emergence of a specific literature, and a new institutional centralization. The networks of Jewish mindfulness present three main characteristics: horizontality, polycentrality, and hybridity.

Observing the evolution of this practice since 2009, I was able to identify two main dynamics: first, an increase of the Jewish aspect of the practice -often correlated to a distanciation with the Buddhist aspect of it. The activity of Jeff Roth testifies for it: he had to move his annual Californian retreat out of Spirit Rock, the direction of the Buddhist center being opposed to the integration of Shabbat services within the meditation retreat format.

Second, the networks are growing increasingly complex, with the emergence of new actors and new collaborations between actors of different groups. Still, this phenomenon remains marginal within large scale Judaism: it is estimated by its to count to no more than a few thousand actors, mainly established in the large American metropolitan areas.

However, a few signs tend to indicate that Jewish mindfulness is it is growing within the English speaking religious field, as show its new developments outside of the American transnational networks: Jeff Roth has led in 2012 his first retreat in Quebec and James Maisels, founder of Or Ha Lev, led his in Toronto in 2013. Both taught their first 'Jewish mindfulness' retreat in England in May 2014. France remains so far removed from this dynamics, perhaps because of the language barrier as well as a more traditionalist Jewish culture (Niculescu 2014).

These rapid evolutions show how the medium of the Internet has contributed to the evolution of offline religion. Provided, as is the case of American Judaism, the local religious culture already be propitious to religious creativity.

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Biography

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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

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