Religion and Immersive Reality

Federico Biggio

Abstract – The essay retraces the fundamental stages that have led religious experience to develop within virtual and immersive realities. Starting with a preliminary critical reflection on the concept of 'virtuality', some case studies are reviewed in which immersive technologies (VR, AR, MR) have played a central role in realizing this type of experience. The origins of the phenomenon in the video game culture of the 2000s are nonetheless considered. The first section will account for the remediation of traditional religions in immersive realities. Particular relevance is attributed to Neopagan rituals, such as cyber-pilgrimages, fandom religions, and new institutions that become custodians of these new spaces of worship. Subsequently, a section dedicated to the case of Technopaganism will allow addressing virtual religious experiences that do not refer just to traditional faiths and embody an animistic interpretation of technology and networks.

Keywords: immersive reality – religion – Technopaganism – video games – fandom

1. Introduction

Historically, there is semantic confusion around the concepts of 'cyberspace', 'virtual reality' and 'immersive reality', especially when defining the kind of religious practices that take place within those domains. In this regard, we may agree with human-computer interaction sciences and understand 'immersive reality religions' as interactions of any type that employ head mounted displays such as VR (virtual reality) and AR (augmented reality) immersive devices to enable the expression of 'religiosity'. However, although research on digital and virtual regions is not in its infancy[1] and the fluidification of the thresholds of the traditional space of religious ritual, as well as the one between sacred and profane, has been attested[2], studies on religious experience in immersive realities enabled

---

[1] B. Brasher, *Give Me that Online Religion*, San Francisco, Rutgers University Press, 2001; M. Højsgaard - M. Warburg, *Religion and Cyberspace*, New York, Routledge, 2005; A. Crompton, *The Architecture of Multifaith Spaces: God Leaves The Building*, in «The Journal of Architecture», 18, 4, 2013, pp. 474-496; H. Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, London, Routledge, 2013; L. Dawson - D. Cowan (eds.), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, London, Routledge, 2013; M. Leone, *Spiritualità Digitale: Il senso religioso nell'era della smaterializzazione*, Milano, Mimesis, 2014.

[2] The contemporary process of sacralization can be understood as a «relocation of the sacred»,

by mixed reality devices are still lacking. Most of the research presented in this report deal with Internet-based 'cyberspaces', sometimes 3D and explorable ones, in which users are immersed through avatars of themselves, rather than with virtual or augmented reality technologies. This is because in several cases the term 'virtual reality' is used to denote any form of digital technology that involves user engagement with software via a screen interface[3]. In this perspective, by 'virtual reality' is indiscriminately meant virtual environments, computer-generated, three-dimensional-appearing, multi-sensorial, interactive, graphical simulations that are not strictly virtual reality that needs headsets to be enjoyed.

Moreover, traditionally, studies on the Internet and digital religions have often highlighted how these practices are perceived as 'secularized' by institutional religions, also by virtue of an ontological separation between the 'real' and the 'virtual'. Just in recent times, the 'on-life'[4] paradigm has notably represented a middle way to overcome this ontological dualism.

In this regard, Grieve proposed a new conceptualization of the term 'virtual' by dealing with the cult of Buddhism in Second Life: according to him, the reason why scholars are reluctant to see cyberspace as a valid site of ethnographic research is because the virtual is assumed to be fake. Instead, the 'virtual' may be understood as simulation of the actual (space of gaming), substitution of the actual (space of realization), extermination of the actual (space of addiction) and desubtantialization of the actual (space of transversality)[5].

«The first model, based on the correspondence theory of representation, maintains that the virtual is a simulation, a false approximation of the real … The second model, an in-

---

since «sacred things» gradually and increasingly become «conceived of as immanent and residing in the deeper layers of the self» (D. Houtman - S. Aupers, *The Spiritual Turn and the Decline of Tradition: The Spread of Post-Christian Spirituality in 14 Western Countries, 1981-2000*, in «Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion», 46, 3, 2007, pp. 305-320). «What we are witnessing today is not so much a disappearance of religion, but rather a relocation of the sacred. Gradually losing its transcendent character, the sacred becomes more and more conceived of as immanent and residing in the deeper layers of the self. At least in many places, religion is giving way to spirituality ... But yet, theoretical controversy about the future of individual religiosity persists» (*Ibidem*, p. 315). In this regard, see also *The Digital Mosque*, one of the first design paradigms for the «convergent mosque» (I. As, *The Digital Mosque: A New Paradigm in Mosque Design*, in «Journal of Architectural Education», 60, 1, 2006, pp. 54-66).

3 R. Wagner, *Godwired. Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality*, London, Routledge, 2012.

4 L. Floridi, *The Onlife Manifesto: Being Human in a Hyperconnected Era*, New York, Springer, 2015.

5 G. Grieve, *Virtually Embodying the Field: Silent Online Meditation, Immersion, and the Cardean Ethnographic Method*, in «Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet», 4, 2010, 1, pp. 35-62, here p. 39.

version of the first, is the suppletion of the real, where the virtual substitutes for what is partial, lacking, and imperfect in the actual world … The second model, an inversion of the first, is [according to Baudrillard 1996] the suppletion of the real, where the virtual substitutes for what is partial, lacking, and imperfect in the actual world … because the virtual is desubstantialized, people in cyberspace are transversal – their bodies can be said to exist both in the virtual and the actual world. In other words, virtual embodiment is not so much about replacement of the actual world body, as it is about the extension of the body into cyberspace»[6].

Several other definitions of 'virtual' in relation to the religious field could be added, as well as of 'immersive reality'[7]. According to Richard Wagner, virtual reality has enabled new forms of world-building and 'cosmos construction' because it serves as a means to make sense of one's world. In her studies the idea emerges that the appearance of 'virtual reality' on the conceptual scene seems to have spurred a rehabilitation of Eliade's terms – i.e., the hierophany and the sacred/profane opposition – as tools for thinking about what to do with «the messy specter of the virtual as it relates to contemporary religious beliefs and practice»[8]. However, in several of them, what is missing is a broader understanding of what VR brings to religious experience in terms of social computing and the sense of presence.

However, to quote Campbell and Vitullo: «The Internet is not a completely separate space; it is integrated by its proximity in many religious behaviors and rituals. As part of everyday social life, it is also a central part of religious existence»[9]. In particular, Campbell defines the intersection between digital media technology and religious phenomena as the «technological and cultural space become blended and/or integrated into our network society»[10]. Moreover, Campbell maintains that «contemporary

---

6   *Ibidem*, pp. 39-49.

7   There is an interesting body of literature, mostly philosophical, that has adopted the concepts of 'virtuality' and 'virtual reality' to describe certain aspects of non-digital religions. For example, Horsfield saw the 'virtual reality of Christianity' in the words «the body of Christ» spoken as a communion wafer or piece of bread is placed on a person's tongue or in their hands, in the virtual reality of new life associated with the physical sensations of immersion in water, in the physical touching of the head, chest and shoulders with the virtual reality of divine presence. P. Horsfield, *Editorial: Christianity as Material and Virtual Reality*, in «Studies in World Christianity», 17, 2011, 2, pp. ix-xvi. In 2017 Skačan returned to this theme, arguing that the «virtual reality of religion should be understood as virtual reality of various specific forms of a cultural phenomenon such as religion»: J. Skačan, *On Virtual Reality of Religion*, in «European Journal of Science and Theology», 13, 2017, 6, pp. 15-23, here p. 17.

8   R. Wagner, *Godwired*, pp. 78-79.

9   H. Campbell - A. Vitullo, *Assessing Changes in the Study of Religious Communities in Digital Religion Studies*, in «Church, Communication and Culture», 1, 2016, pp. 73-89, here p. 82.

10   H. Campbell, *The Internet as Social-Spiritual Space*, in J. McKay, *Netting Citizens: Exploring*

society often feels isolated and disconnected», so that «the Internet has come to represent another-worldly space allowing people to re-engage with issues of spirituality»[11].

As a consequence, the aim of this report is to review some of the main approaches to the study of digital religions, particularly those that have delved into the 'immersive' and 'virtual' dimensions of experience.

Building on the legacy of research on religious practices in Internet-based immersive contexts[12], several studies have examined the spiritual and otherworldly experiences enabled by technologies and immersive realities in the past. In these environments, often users bring their own beliefs to video game environments, visit 3D virtual temples, or even perform ancestral ceremonies by means of electronic devices and virtual or augmented reality technologies.

In this regard, Højsgaard & Warburg identified a «first wave» of research in the writings of Kinney (1995), O'Leary (1996) and Zaleski (1997)[13], followed by a 'second wave' of research on religious communication online.

«In only a few years, the academic study of religion on the Internet has moved from its first wave of research – focusing on the fascinating, new, and extra-ordinary aspects of cyberspace – to its second wave that tends to emphasize the diversity of the field and the need to put new findings into a broader historical and social perspective. In the first wave of research on religion and cyberspace, computers and the Internet could (and probably would) do almost anything. The Internet could create new religions existing only in cyberspace … In the second wave of research on religion in cyberspace, the significance of computer networks is not neglected, but is put into a more realistic perspective»[14].

Citizenship in the Internet Age, Edinburgh, Saint Andrew Press, 2004, pp. 208-231.

[11] H. Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We Are One in the Network*, New York, Peter Lang, 2005, p. 3. Exemplary in this regard is Campbell's research on the spirituality of the iPhone. H. Campbell - A. La Pastina, *How the IPhone Became Divine: New Media, Religion and the Intertextual Circulation of Meaning*, in «New Media and Society», 12, 2010, 17, pp. 1-17.

[12] K. Radde-Antweiler, *Virtual Religion. An Approach to a Religious and Ritual Topography of Second Life*, in «Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet», 3.1, 2008, pp. 174-210; H. Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, London, Routledge, 2013; G. Grieve, *Virtually Embodying the Field: Silent Online Meditation, Immersion, and the Cardean Ethnographic Method*, in «Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet», 4, 2010, 1, pp. 35-62.

[13] J. Kinney, *Net Worth? Religion, Cyberspace, and the Future*, in «Futures», 27, 1995, 7, pp. 763-776; S.D. O'Leary, *Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks*, «Journal of the American Academy of Religion», 64, 1996, pp. 781-808; J. Zaleski, *The Soul of Cyberspace: How New Technology Is Changing Our Spiritual Lives*, San Francisco, HarperEdge, 1997; M. Højsgaard - M. Warburg, *Religion and Cyberspace*, New York, Routledge, 2005.

[14] The basis for the book was the international conference on «Religion and computer-mediated communication» held in Copenhagen on 1-3 November 2001.

Pivotal was also the work of Heidi Campbell (2005; 2011; 2013; 2017)[15]. After its publication in 2013, the miscellany that she edited furnished useful insights in several field of analysis of digital religions, such as their rituals, identity, community, authority, authenticity and, finally, religion. According to the editor, which in turn starts with Bauwens (1996)[16], it is possible to detail different narratives describing digital media technology and its relation with religious phenomena. These narratives are the 'spiritual network', the 'mission tool', the 'sacramental space' and the 'religious identity'. According to Campbell, these narratives can be adopted by traditional religious groups and individuals able to employ particular rhetorical discourses or images of the Internet, describing it in a way that presents it as suitable for religious use or spiritual engagement[17].

In order to explore this complex array of beliefs, practices and technologies, the second section of this report will first consider academic studies focusing on the remediation of traditional religions. Not without scepticism, traditional religions have gradually adopted digital and immersive media to communicate with worshippers, although their authority does not allow for research on religious forms. However, the research on semiotic languages of traditional digital religions showed that the languages of myths, collective rituals and visual manifestations of God are among the most debated. Moreover, immersive technologies are applied to the religious field and also to what concerns virtual tourism and cultural heritage preservation and valorization.

The third section will describe a theological trajectory, aimed to explore the approaches to religiosity and religious groups in Internet-based immersive reality. Here, the focus will be on research dealing with the subjective experience of religiosity enabled by cyberspaces, virtual realities and immersive environments, as well as ethnographic analyses of digital religions and empirical experiments on the sense of religiosity in VR, such as *Second Life*. Since it is social interaction that emerges as the dominant

---

[15] H. Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online*; *Internet and Religion*, in «The Handbook of Internet Studies», Oxford, Wiley - Blackwell, 2011, pp. 232-250; *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, London, Routledge, 2013.

[16] Bauwens, in particular, explored the relationship between spirituality and technology by focusing on Internet religion as a degenerate practice and/or as a means to bring mankind to a higher level of consciousness or to a more well-developed civilization: M. Bauwens, *View of Spirituality and Technology: Exploring the Relationship*, in «First Monday», 1, 1996, 5. The hope in the anthropological development is confirmed by the attention to the dimension of wisdom and God's Project, as well as the sacramental cyberspace.

[17] H. Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online*, p. 9.

characteristic of these kinds of experiences, the third section will also account for the religiosity of the immersive realities enabled by transmedia storytelling[18]: from this perspective, it will account for a sociological trajectory whereby research is focused on believers' communities, practices of aggregation and collective mediated-rituality. As will be seen, not only does sci-fi culture express itself within these forms, but a large number of game cultures – from *Hunger Games* to *Minecraft* – find room for expression and action in these environments. Finally, this trajectory often focuses on the relationship between technology and religious experience, and builds on the study of the role of technologies in the history of religions, religiosity and faith, up to the religions born on the Web and technomysticism. This is the case of technopagans and cyber-animists, whose discourses often intercept the themes of theoretical reflection on the cyberspaces of digital religions.

2.   The Remediation of Traditional Religions in Immersive Reality

Before considering studies on contemporary religions that have arisen within non-institutionalized immersive contexts, the remediation of traditional religions may represent a first and simpler case that has been taken into account in previous research.

Cases of ICT integration in institutional religious communication can be seen as early as the end of the last century. Already in 1988, Hadden coined the term «televangelism» in order to denote religious broadcasting on American radio, and nowadays it is commonplace for religious and institutional figures to make extensive use of digital devices to communicate and evangelize[19]. Sometimes, they conduct digital evangelization also in the form of a manual[20]. This is because, from Catholic and Buddhist Eucharistic meditation chambers to Muslim prayers, interactive and immersive technologies have proved able to work as coherent and powerful means with which to organize and perform traditional religious activities.

---

[18] H. Jenkins - S. Ford - J. Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, New York, New York University Press, 2013.

[19] H. Campbell - A. Vitullo, *Popes in Digital Era. Reflecting on the Rise of the Digital Papacy*, in «Problemi dell'informazione», 44, 2019, 3, pp. 419-442; A. Lorusso - P. Peverini (eds.), *Il racconto di Francesco. La comunicazione del Papa nell'era della connessione globale*, Roma, Luiss University Press, 2017.

[20] T. Blythe - D. Wolpert, *Meeting God in Virtual Reality: Using Spiritual Practices with Media*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2004.

These facts testify to the evolution of secularization, from a non-religious phenomenon to a remediation of religions and religious cultural practices.

Regarding immersive realities and remaining within the Christian culture, a paper on the new mission frontier of the Virtual Reality Church of D.J. Soto, emphasized the theological issues that arise with the introduction of VR into the conventional perspective of the church's ministry and mission. In particular, he maintained that Covid represented yet another call for the adoption of immersive technologies by religious institutions, in which creeds and mission statements seek to be radically inclusive of all types of believers who meet and worship in a shared virtual reality, including atheists (21 June 2020). The religious openness claimed by digital technologies is a fundamental aspect of the issue that, as we shall see, meta-discourses on digital religions have addressed several times.

This progressive adjustment can also be seen in the presence of research projects. A notable project in this field is ReIReS, a community whose aim is to create a unique and ground-breaking research infrastructure on religious studies within the European Research Area[21]. It is led by the Foundation for Religious Sciences Giovanni XXIII and it groups eleven European universities. Similarly, the URPP (University Research Priority Program) on Digital Religion(s) of the University of Zurich[22] investigates how current dynamics of digitalization influence, shape and transform the religious practices of individuals and institutions, as well as how individual and institutional religious actors communicate in hybrid online-offline formats and how they assert their public claim to provide guidance on questions of identity formation, health, pastoral care and interreligious education. It is led by Prof. Dr. Thomas Schlag and it relies on the work of more than thirty researchers and IT specialists. Its core issues and major topics concern religious identity formation and the development of collaborative online-offline networks, practices of media communication in grieving and pastoral care, as well as phenomena of religion-related digital education. More devoted to an ecumenical dimension is instead the project RESILIENCE (REligious Studies Infrastructure: tooLs, Experts, conNections and CEnters in Europe) which aims to create a pan-European research infrastructure (RI) which provides access to sources, research results, expertise and tools for researchers and individuals interested in religion-related topics[23].

---

[21] https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/730895.

[22] https://www.digitalreligions.uzh.ch/en.html.

[23] https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/871127.

Also in recent times, one research topic that has received particular attention has been the remediation of religion amid the Covid pandemic. The BRIC-19 project, for example, has involved religious professionals of a range of faiths from across Britain to capture, analyse, nurture and develop these fire-forged adaptations and the possibilities they facilitate, using digitally-led methods drawn from digital religion, online religion and performance studies, including the involvement of subjects in action research. It is led by Dr. Joshua Edelman, senior lecturer at the Manchester School of Theatre, Manchester Metropolitan University. This is a topic that also the Faculty of Theology of the University of Malta has dealt with in the project entitled 'The Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic. Religion and Spirituality during the Challenging Times'[24]. Also Campbell (2020) addressed this issue, by arguing that the pandemic era forced church leaders to find alternatives to physical gatherings and spaces, and have been engaged in technological options to do this – what she called a «distanced church»[25]. The book brings together contributions that investigate the expressive and communicative potential of the religious message on social media and teleconferencing platforms[26].

On the other hand, immersive reality technologies are not implemented for theological objectives alone: several of their uses relate to the practices of cultural heritage promotion and preservation.

«VR glasses have brought a whole new level of immersiveness to virtual reality, and some religious communities have already found ways to use them. In the Helsinki Cathedral in Finland, tourists can rent VR glasses to visit the bell tower in virtual reality. In addition, Oculus VR glasses have their own Christian prayer garden game. The VR Church takes virtual reality church even further, as their congregation meets only in virtual reality and for some it is their only church. For those who are physically disabled in a way that prohibits them to attend a physical church, attending a church in virtual reality might be the only option»[27].

Similarly, Llerena-Izquierdo and Cedeño-Gonzabay (2020) used photogrammetry and augmented reality (Unity and Vuforia) to promote the religious cultural heritage of San Pedro Cathedral in Guayaquil, Ecuador, in particular the interactivity and engagement of tourists. Another study

---

[24] https://www.um.edu.mt/theology/research/covid19.

[25] H. Campbell, *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online*, 2020: https://jliflc.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Distanced-Church-PDF-landscape-FINAL-version.pdf (accessed on 15 July 2023).

[26] On this subject see also B. Taylor, *Sharing Faith Using Social Media*, New York, Grove Books, 2016.

[27] P. Hannikainen, *How Real is Virtual Religion?*, in «Perspectives on 2020: EARS - European Academy of Religion and Society», Amsterdam, European Academy of Religion and Society, pp. 312-314, here p. 313.

by Al-Makhadmah (2020)[28] examined the role of virtual museums in promoting religious tourism in Jordan. Greci (2016) also described religious museums where augmented reality apps provide for the system's recognition of the artwork and superimposes it multimedia materials, 3D models and interactive/sharing sections[29]. Nowadays this trend continues to be explored in the design of educational virtual reality spaces such as Google Expeditions, which make it possible to explore religious places in different countries[30]. A further example is the Virtual Reality Oracle[31], a first-person virtual reality experience of oracular divination at the ancient Greek oracle of Zeus at Dodona. Visitors may consult the oracle, thereby enhancing their knowledge of ancient Greece and its ritualistic activities. The Virtual Reality Oracle is very much geared towards education, although references to the museum and public engagement also appear in its presentation. Finally, the preservation of cultural heritage is also the concern of the study by Syu[32] on Jiā Jiāng, an important religious performance in Taiwan where people painted in the face, wearing a dress and helmet of God, hand holding instruments, play God general patrol. After the motion capture and the performance analysis, scientists have been able to reconstruct the ritual in a computer-generated environment, and they argued the importance of these techniques for intangible cultural heritage documentation and preservation.

A notable experience, an English one, was the Church of Fools, a three-dimensional church where the faithful could «kneel, stand, pray, sing a hymn, ring the church bells, make gestures such as cross themselves, and so on, on the screen»[33]. The Church of Fools was more than just an 'avatarish' worship experience; it was also an online discussion

---

[28]   I. Al-Makhadmah, *The Role of Virtual Museum in Promoting Religious Tourism in Jordan*, in «GeoJournal of Tourism and Geosites», 28, 2020, 1, pp. 268-274.

[29]   L. Greci, *An Augmented Reality Guide for Religious Museum*, in « Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality, and Computer Graphics». Third International Conference, AVR 2016, Lecce -Italy, June 15-18, 2016, London, Springer, 2016, pp. 280-289.

[30]   C. Johnson, *Using Virtual Reality and 360-Degree Video in the Religious Studies Classroom: An Experiment*, in «Teaching Theology & Religion», 21, 2018, 3, pp. 228-241.

[31]   http://www.vroracle.co.uk.

[32]   Y. Syu - L. Chen - Y. Tu, *A Case Study of Digital Preservation of Motion Capture for Bā Jiā Jiāng Performance, Taiwan Religious Performing Arts*, in «Digital Heritage. Progress in Cultural Heritage: Documentation, Preservation, and Protection». Sixth International Conference, EuroMed 2016, Nicosia - Cyprus, October 31-November 5, 2016, London, Springer, 2016, pp. 103-110.

[33]   R. Kluver - Y. Chen, *The Church of Fools. Virtual Ritual and Material Faith*, in «Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet», 3.1, 2008, pp. 116-142.

forum where participants from all over Britain participated in serious, intellectually rich discussions on the Christian faith.

Moreover, reflection on the remediation of traditional religions in immersive realities also comprises studies on semiotic languages, in particular the forms assumed by ritual. Among all religious activities, «the ritual is ultimately the most interactive and immersive one that expresses certain meanings and effects»[34]. In the field of media studies, L. Mann (2019) argued that religious uses of VR/AR relate to three essential features of religion: myth, ritual, and faith[35]. In the process of digital remediation, these formats manifest as interactive storytelling, which, following Wagner, adopts game mechanics including hermeneutic inquiries, cinematic productions and biblical interpretations: the mechanics materialize in the so-called «ritual-game-story thing»[36]. With attention to multi-user VR churches, instead, Schroeder et al. (1998) defined the main empirical aspects to be considered[37]. They conducted a comparative analysis of the E-Church and other virtual worlds which underlined the importance of the 'structuredness' of the social interaction and the 'roles' performed by the former. Frequently, digital practices have been structured based on the principles of video game mechanics, which have always been culturally connoted as autotelic and profane, and often they have brought with them dysphoric connotations. Authors like Possamai (2012), for instance, consider these phenomena as instances of 'hyper real' religions, an expression based on a negative re-interpretation of Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality[38]. On the contrary, in 2017, a special issue of the «Hei-

---

[34] C. Bell, *Ritual. Perspective and Dimension*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 138.

[35] J. Mann, *Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality, and Religion. Recent Developments and Their Significance*, in S. Natale - D. Pasulka (eds.), «Believing in Bits: Digital Media and the Supernatural», Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019.

[36] R. Wagner, *Godwired*, p. 54.

[37] R. Schroeder - N. Heather - L. Raymond, *The Sacred and the Virtual: Religion in Multi-User Virtual Reality*, in «Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication», 4, 1998, 2.

[38] A. Possamai (ed.), *Handbook of Hyper-Real Religions*, Leiden, Brill, 2012. Wagner also emphasizes the concern that VR makes it even more difficult to circumscribe the conventions of 'authentic experience' because it makes it impossible to distinguish what is authentic and religious from what is not: «the virtual is, like the profane, a space into which something different can be put, and through that tension, invite reflection on the Other» (*Ibidem*, p. 97). However, according to Wagner, the «virtual sacred» is in opposition to the «sacred», because the latter cannot be accessed, while the former is «a feast of manifestness», the place of self-image where the Other is represented in a reflective manner. Other authors have instead conceived virtual environments as communication technologies of Christian faith (J. Kay, *Virtual Environments as Communication Technologies of Faith*, in «Virtual, Augmented and Mixed Reality». Eighth International Conference, VAMR 2016, Held as Part of HCI International 2016, Toronto - Canada, July 17-22, 2016, London, Springer, 2016, pp. 691-701).

delberg Journal of Religions on the Internet» was devoted to religions in mobile Internet environments, mobile apps and augmented reality. The issue covered a wide spectrum of topics, from the religious implications of alternate reality games such as *Pokémon Go* and reactions to them by religious institutions, to research on pedagogy and technological methods for religious education.

On the other hand, it is possible to locate theological research that adopts frameworks and models of cognitive philosophy and religious sciences. For example, Tratner and others (2020) analyzed the cognitive functioning of agency detection and belief in supernatural agents, since beliefs in any gods rely on such functions[39]. This process of agency detection has been tested in VR environments in order to understand if VR could be a good medium through which to 'see the unseen', that is, to induce false agency detection and to play a pivotal role in the foundation of supernatural beliefs. Similarly, Hatam (2020) analyzed religiosity bias in VR users who were questioned about the interpersonal distance that they felt[40]. He cited a first research study by Maij, van Schie, and van Elk and another one by Andersen, Pfeiffer, Muller, and Schjoedt, where scientists used cutting-edge experimental designs to investigate the optimal conditions for misattributions of agency. Thanks to VR technology, participants could move around in highly controlled but immersive forestscapes that replicated the milieu of early hunter-gatherers.

From the perspective of the cognitive science of religion, Hornbeck and Barrett suggested that human minds may interact with VR-hosted phenomena in a manner very similar to that in which they interact with supernatural concepts. They can do so because it is possible to manipulate ontological norms, enjoy anonymity and plasticity of representation, and advertise the type of information that triggers social cognitive mechanisms but which may be highly inappropriate or disadvantaging in the 'real' world. To be cited in the same field is the work of Jeremy Bailenson at the Virtual Human Interaction Lab of Stanford University (2011).

As regards visual languages through which the virtual presence of God is expressed in the context of a ritual, Wagner (2012) enquired whether an

---

[39] A. Tratner et al., *Fear the Unseen: Supernatural Belief and Agency Detection in Virtual Reality*, in «Religion, Brain & Behavior», 10, 2020, 2, pp. 118-131. Schjoedt et al. also studied the formation of beliefs in supernatural agents: U. Schjoedt et al., *Vikings, Virtual Reality, and Supernatural Agents in Predictive Minds*, in «Religion, Brain & Behaviour», 9, 2019.

[40] J. Hatam et al., *The Effect of Gender, Religiosity and Personality on the Interpersonal Distance Preference: A Virtual Reality Study*, in «Communication Research Reports», 37, 2020, 4.

IAR (immersive augmented reality) projection of Christ into a room coupled with an artificial intelligence interface could be labelled a 'hierophany'. She contended, «with augmented reality, the virtual world steps out of the computer 'box' and into our lives with incredibly powerful implications for religious experience»[41]. In a similar way, Mansour proposed a visual analysis of light as a distinctive symbol of the sacred cyberspace like a virtual church[42], whilst Ali et al. (2021) accounted for the effects of light on the moods of people using a church design in the virtual reality environment[43].

3. The Theology of Immersive Reality Religions

Over the past thirty years, various epistemological approaches, such as sociology, media and cultural studies, cognitive science and digital ethnography, have been used to interrogate non-institutional digital religions, i.e., those systems of beliefs and practices that have emerged with the Internet and that are being consolidated and standardized in their forms and values, giving rise to outright theological systems. One of the most important research trajectories in this field is the one focused on Second Life. Here we can find Grieve's essay on Buddhist meditation into the immersive environment of the platform, which is more focused on the issues of immersiveness and embodiment.

«When logged onto such places as Second Life, while one's fingers type on the keyboard, one is also 'virtually embodied' in a transversal world. I am not arguing the untenable position that somehow, as in the movie Tron (1982), one drags one's physical body into cyberspace. Instead, using Judith Butler's understanding of the body as practice, I maintain that a theory of virtual embodiment differentiates immersion as performance from immersion as a proprioceptive sensation. In such a case, virtual embodiment can be defined as an immersed bodily performance that occurs in cyberspace»[44].

Leone (2011) also proposed a semiotics of religious space in Second Life[45]. He maintained that there are five main characteristics of the aesthetics,

---

[41] R. Wagner, *Godwired*, p. 91.

[42] N. Mansour, *The Holy Light of Cyberspace: Spiritual Experience in a Virtual Church*, in «Religions», 13, 2022, 121.

[43] M.K. Ali - A. Şahin - I. Erkan, *The Effect of Types of Light on People's Mood Using a Church as an Example in the Virtual Reality*, in «Mental Health, Religion & Culture», 24, 2021, 5, pp. 504-518.

[44] G. Grieve, *Virtually Embodying the Field: Silent Online Meditation, Immersion, and the Cardean Ethnographic Method*, in «Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet», 4, 2010, 1, pp. 35-62, here p. 37.

[45] M. Leone, *The Semiotics of Religious Space in Second Life*, in «Social Semiotics», 21, 2011, 3, pp. 337-357.

phenomenology, and semiotics of digital places of worship: isolation – in the sense of disconnectedness from the surrounding environment; prototypicality – i.e., they are prototypical of a certain religious culture, and of its architectural and artistic style; didacticism – in the sense that they are developed not only and not so much for the internaut who already adheres to a certain religion in the «First Life», but also and above all for the internaut who, through Second Life, has to be stimulated to know and possibly embrace a certain system of religious beliefs; anarchy – because the control that the religious space can exert on the digital bodies that enter it, move in it, and act in it, is much more limited than in the First Life; and parasitism – because the most original places of worship in Second Life are mostly semi-serious parodies of traditional places. Dos Santos (2022) also considered the Buddha Center and the Children of Artemis community in Second Life[46].

One ritualistic form that has emerged predominantly with digital religions in immersive realities has been the «cyber-pilgrimage». This is because such experiences tend to be perceived as more self-mediated and, thus, more individualized, liberated and radical than terrestrial experiences of a similar sort[47]. As evidenced by Dwivedi & Narula (2020), the technological virtual world has begun to affect approaches towards pilgrimages (for example, the simulacrum of a pilgrimage gives enormous freedom to the pilgrims, presenting them with customized to be more real images of the places of worship)[48]. In this perspective, Helland (2000) already had analyzed cyber-pilgrimages and neo-pagan chatroom communities in the Twenties, as well as issues related to youth, religion and the Internet, new religious movements and recruitment, propaganda and counterculture, and religious tradition and innovation[49]. The well-known distinction between «online religion» (websites in which users can act with unrestricted freedom and a high level of interactivity) and «religion online» (which provides only religious information and is not interactive) has been proposed by him in this work[50].

---

[46]   V. Dos Santos, «Technopaganism: A Semiotic Approach to Digital Religious Phenomena», PhD diss., University of Turin, 2022.

[47]   Though this is not necessarily the case: see C. Hill-Smith, *Cyberpilgrimage: The (Virtual) Reality of Online Pilgrimage Experience*, in «Religion Compass», 5, 2011, 6, pp. 236-246.

[48]   P. Dwivedi - A. Narula, *Religious Communities in Simulated Sacred Spaces: A Study of Pilgrimages in Digital Media*, in «Journal of Content, Community & Communication», 11, 2020, 6, pp. 260-267.

[49]   C. Helland, *Online Religion/Religion Online and Virtual Communitas*, in «Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises», London, JAI Press, 2000, pp. 205-224.

[50]   *Ibidem.*

Besides, to the analysis of the theological discourse on the religious forms of aggregation of immersive realities, it is possible to add a series of studies that have been concerned with the religious and spiritual significance of the transmedia storytelling of recent decades (*Star Wars*, *Matrix*, *Harry Potter*, *World of Warcraft*): such studies embody the tendency of digital religions in creating fragmentary stories and immersive worlds that the bricoleur's fruition have to unify; such environments set up a series of elements that enable ritualistic and active participation and, hence, some kind of fandom faith[51]. Rather than conforming to a particular religious tradition, New Agers combine elements from various traditions into packages of meaning that 'feel good' personally[52]. Indeed, open-world games like Minecraft, 3D virtual communities like Second Life, as well as immersive story-worlds such as those created by *Hunger Games*[53], *Witchcraft*[54] and *World of Warcraft*[55] have become collaborative and configurable spaces in which many users engage with religious practices at considerable levels of immersion[56]. In this field, Markus Davidsen, when using the term «fiction-based religion», provides an outstanding example of how and why many of the emerging religious practices, influenced by pop culture or fictional narratives, usually represent a valid and spiritually significant faith. In regard to fandom religions, Davidsen draws an analytical distinction between religion and play «which makes it possible to distinguish between religious use of fiction (fiction-based religion) and playful engagement with fiction (fandom)»[57].

Starting from Gibson's idea of cyberspace as a «consensual hallucination», it is possible to locate in this field semiotic analysis of cultural imaginary related to technoreligions. According to Pels (2013), cyberpunk narratives reinvented religion in order to fit the secular experiences of modern people in the same way that spiritualism 'sacralized' new

---

51   H. Jenkins - S. Ford - J. Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, New York, New York University Press, 2013.

52   S. Aupers - D. Houtman (eds.), *Religions of Modernity. Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital*, Leiden, Brill, 2010.

53   Y. Ringlestein, *Real or Not Real: The Hunger Games as Transmediated Religion*, in «The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture», 25, 2013, 3, pp. 372-387.

54   M. Nightmare, *Witchcraft and the Web: Weaving Pagan Traditions Online*, Toronto, ECW Press, 2001.

55   J. Schaap - S. Aupers, *Gods in World of Warcraft Exist. Religious Reflexivity and the Quest for Meaning in Online Computer Games*, in «New Media & Society», 19, 2016, 11, pp. 1744-1760.

56   I. Baglioni - I. Biano - C. Crosignani (eds.), *Religioni fantastiche e dove trovarle. Divinità, miti e riti nella fantascienza e nel fantasy*, Roma, Quasar, 2023.

57   M. Davidsen, *Fiction-based Religion: Conceptualizing a New Category Against History-based Religion and Fandom*, in «Culture and Religion», 14, 2013, 4, pp. 378-395, here p. 380.

technologies in the nineteenth century[58]. According to these thoughts, rather than destroying the sacred tout court, as Weber prophesied with the disenchantment of the world, the modern forces of individualism, science and technology 're-enhance' the religious and spiritual experience. In the curatorship *Religions of Modernity*[59], an examination of the dysphoric ideology of digital religions is promoted through a review of New Age writings, on spiritual self and the Western adoption of oriental thought.

Anderson's (2018) analysis of *Ready Player One*'s protagonist and his disdainful scepticism about Christian constructs, for example, aids understanding of how paradise is portrayed in similar ways in science fiction and media[60]. Examples are sci-fi heavens such as San Junipero (*Black Mirror*) and the OASIS (*Ready Player One*), which not surprisingly are immersive digital environments. They are often depicted as more receptive than the Christian heaven. Indeed, «science fiction that features IVR [immersive virtual reality] tends to condemn Christian values, assuming that the Christian criteria for access to the Christian heaven is too limited because it excludes, for example, the entire LGBT community»[61].

A subject that is gradually emerging in the philosophical discourse on death and the media relates also to the management and commemoration of the profiles of deceased persons. There are several tools with which to commemorate users' accounts or to create pages to remember the dead. Such tools improve a person's capacity to overcome their own pain[62]. In an interesting case – which occurred in February 2020 in South Korea – Jang Ji-Sung met her dead daughter thanks to the «Meeting You» project, which enabled her, wearing a virtual reality helmet, to see and interact with the digital representation of the girl[63]. Such a trend continued to be explored and enriched in languages also by us-

---

[58]   P. Pels, *Amazing Stories: How Science Fiction Sacralizes the Secular*, in «Deus in Machina: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between», New York, Fordham University Press, 2013.

[59]   S. Aupers - D. Houtman (eds.), *Religions of Modernity*.

[60]   R. Anderson, *Virtually Heaven: Transhumanist Constructions of Christian Heaven in 'Ready Player One' and 'San Junipero'*, in «Relics, Remnants, and Religion: An Undergraduate Journal in Religious Studies», 3, 2018, 1.

[61]   *Ibidem*, p. 2.

[62]   P. Stokes, *Ghosts in the Machine: Do the Dead Live on in Facebook?*, in «Philosophy & Technology», 25, 2012, 3, pp. 363-379.

[63]   «Meeting You» was produced by one of South Korea's largest broadcasters, Munhwa Broadcasting Corp, which worked with six different studios to create the VR experience.

er-generated-content such as that by Player One, which created a VR videoclip showing a first-person experience of abandoning the physical body and entering Heaven[64].

Finally, the analysis of immersive reality religion cannot be said to be complete without a focus on the technomystic and technopagan tradition – which, not rarely, employs VR and a computer-generated environment as spaces of worship. Again, it is difficult to precisely circumscribe the scope of phenomena to which this expression refers.

According to Dos Santos (2022), there are many terms that make reference to the category of religions belonging to digital media: «cyber-religions», «technognosticism» and «technopaganism». However, the first two may refer to other ways to practice institutionalized religions. In an article in «Wired», Erik Davis introduced the work of Mark Pesce, in order to present technopaganism to the magazine's readers and, in the meantime, to address some of the main issues concerning the expression of religiosity in virtual environments.

«Having worked in communications for more than a decade, Pesce read William Gibson's breathtaking description of cyberspace as a call to arms, and he's spent the last handful of years bringing Neuromancer's consensual hallucination to life – concocting network technologies, inventing virtual reality gadgets, tweaking the World Wide Web. Long driven to hypermedia environments, the MIT dropout has now designed a way to 'perceptualize the Internet' by transforming the Web into a three-dimensional realm navigable by our budding virtual bodies»[65].

Technocultures and cyber-animism are also strictly related to neo-paganism. According to Drury (2002):

«The relationship between neopagans and technology appears to have its roots in the American counterculture itself, for it is now widely acknowledged that the present-day computer ethos owes a substantial debt to the psychedelic consciousness movement ... It would seem that the somewhat unlikely fusion between pagans and cyberspace arose simply because techno-pagans are capable of being both technological and mystical at the same time»[66].

Technopaganism is also characterized by an interrelation between rave culture and technopagan worship[67]. This idea is shared by Aaron Pavao

---

[64] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B3J0zfEtd2o&t=64s.

[65] https://web.archive.org/web/20081120211437/http://www.techgnosis.com/index_technopagans.html

[66] N. Drury, *Magic and Cyberspace: Fusing Technology and Magical. Consciousness in the Modern World*, in «Esoterica», 4, 2002, p. 98.

[67] F. Vecoli, *La religione ai tempi del web*, Bologna, Laterza, 2013.

(2017), who also relates the techno-pagan mode of operation to the one known as «bricolage»[68]. Indeed, on several other occasions these religions have been conceived as «open-source religions»[69], «do-it-yourself religions» or «pick-and-mix religions»[70]. Campbell, too, is one of the authors who studies technopaganism as a sort of online re-adaptation[71] of various neopagan currents.

Regarding technopaganism, a very important contribution was that by Davis (2015)[72], which added mysticism to reflection on digital religions. His analysis considered several issues, from technological embodiment in an «image of the soul» – i.e., a host of images: redemptive, demonic, magical, transcendent, hypnotic, alive[73] – to the transcendental or supernatural value of computation. According to Erik Davis, technopaganism might acknowledge the fact that technologies «have been enchanted to some degree all along, and technopagan magic must be seen in the larger and more ambivalent context of a widespread, if unacknowledged, technological animism»[74]. In this view, «technologies of communication are always, at least potentially, technologies of the sacred, simply because the ideas and experiences of the sacred have always informed human communication»[75].

Moreover, by leveraging on the work of Mark Pesce, Davis considered also the use of VR and immersive digital environments to perform religious practices, as well as the richer meaning of 'cyberspace' that the VR makes it possible to imagine.

«Pesce's VRML became the key to transforming the Web into a world, or rather a universe of worlds, according with Danis. Each of them is capable of nesting information within a kind of virtual theater: downtown Boston, a mock-up of Stonehenge, a blasted moonscape littered with Day-Glo monoliths»[76].

---

[68]   A. Pavao, *Introduction to Technopaganism and Technoshamanism*, 2017, http://project.cyberpunk.ru/idb/technopaganism_and_technoshamanism.html.

[69]   D. Cowan, *Cyberhenge. Modern Pagans on the Internet*, London, Routledge, 2005.

[70]   S. Aupers - D. Houtman (eds.), *Religions of Modernity*, p. 306.

[71]   H. Campbell, *Religious Communication and Technology*, in «Annals of the International Communication», 4, 2017, 3-4, pp. 228-234.

[72]   E. Davis, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, Berkeley CA, North Atlantic Books, 2015.

[73]   *Ibidem*, p. 12.

[74]   *Ibidem*, p. 439.

[75]   *Ibidem*, p. 11.

[76]   *Ibidem*.

He continued with a description of the CyberSamhain ritual[77]:

«Pagan ceremonies set the stage by establishing a ritual circle through a combination of performance and creative visualization. At once laboratory and temple, these circles stand 'between the worlds', carving out room for magic and the gods in the midst of mundane space-time. After casting the circle, Pagans usually invoke the powers that animate the four elements of ancient lore: earth, air, water, and fire … Each monitor screen became a window into a three-dimensional ritual space, a VRML world whose pentagrams and colored polyhedrons mirrored the actual room's magic circle. The astral plane had been reconfigured in cyberspace»[78].

In this regard, «as new meanings are invested into the universe of machines, and new virtual possibilities emerge»[79], the ubiquitous digital medium continues to encourage and develop a variety of religious and esoteric discourses, giving rise to a kind of surrounding technomysticism[80].

Sometimes, inquiries start from philosophy and religious studies[81] and the theory of magic[82]; in several other cases, they do so from Silicon Valley technoculture, accompanied by the use of technoutopian rhetoric, so much so that the computer has definitely become an idol[83]. Such a philosophy can also be put in continuity with Kelly, who proposed «The Nine Laws of God» in 1999 – i.e., organizing principles that can be found operating in systems as diverse as biological evolution or virtual and social communities such as SimCity. Clearly more a philosophy of contemporaneity than a theological reflection on digital media, Kelly's contribution stands in continuity with some important current epistemic traditions (from connective intelligence to eusociality).

---

77   An analysis of the Sufi digital ritual has been conducted by Dos Santos (2022). Here, all the participants wear an Oculus Rift as they move in a sort of common space that cannot be seen from outside. According to Dos Santos, in this and similar situations, digital-technological devices mediate the religious activity in order to connect with the sacred, as well as with other people and/or other environments. This represents an intense sensorial experience of faith happening in virtual worlds. V. Dos Santos, «Technopaganism», p. 139.

78   E. Davis, *TechGnosis*, p. 230.

79   E. Davis, *TechGnosis*, p. 42.

80   *Ibidem*, pp. 38-40.

81   S. Aupers, *The Revenge of the Machines: On Modernity, Digital Technology and Animism*, in «Asian Journal of Social Science», 30, 2002, 2, pp. 199-220 and *The Force is Great: Enchantment and Magic in Silicon Valley*, in «Masaryk University Journal of Law and Technology», 3, 2009, 1, pp. 153-173.

82   S. Knight - P. Telesco, *The Cyberspell Book: Magic in the Virtual World*, Iowa, New Page Books, 2002.

83   E. Davis, *TechGnosis*, p. 12. Through a qualitative analysis of «Wired» magazine (1993-2000), Aupers dealt with the mystification of technology (S. Aupers, *The Revenge of the Machines*, p. 218) by arguing that the implementation of digital technology also stimulates the religious, or more specific, animistic imagination and that the ongoing process of rationalization seems to provide a good explanation for the contemporary emergence of technoanimism.

Other authors have also examined the contamination between computation and magic. Stephanie Moran (2018)[84] argued that the genealogy of VR goes back to the Vodun origins of West Africa, which predate Western computation in particular Leibnizs binary code and geomancy by centuries. This subject has been addressed also by Matteo Pasquinelli, who, by drawing also on the work of historian Lewis Mumford, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, described The Agnicayana ritual and the myth of cosmogenesis from the ancient Vedas as «algorithmic» by correlating the ancient geometry of the Agnicayana ritual, the computational matrix of the first neural network Perceptron, and the complex navigational system of self-driving vehicles.

In a similar manner, Proctor (2018) focused on the transformation of being that occurs in immersive technoculture religions. According to him, when we enter the digital realm, we «find ourselves (much like in any other environment) one type of thing among many other types of things ... they (and we) are all thinging and Being in particular ways»[85]. According to Proctor, depending on the digital platform, «affordances can limit interactions to liking or following or choosing from a number of pre-programmed quasi-emotional connections. And when we decided to 'follow' another thing, or even have a conversation with it, how can we be sure that thing is endowed with personhood in the same way we feel ourselves to be? It could very well be a bot»[86]. Proctor refers to this scenario as «cybernetic animism», «the practice of interacting in digital spaces within an ecology of non-humans and/or non-bodied elements and the process through which this interaction makes open-bodied identification available as a way of Being-in-the-World»[87]; something that we could ultimately refer to as Harari's «dataism» (2018).

Conclusions

This report, as well as the numerous comprehensive works cited before, testify to a progressive evolution of the languages, practices and meanings that govern digital religions in immersive realities. The spaces of the

---

84   S. Moran, *Coding the Digital Occult: The Binary [Techno]Pagan and Vodun Ontologies of Cyberspace*, in «Etic Lab», 21 November 2018: https://eticlab.co.uk/coding- the-digital-occult/.

85   D. Proctor, *Cybernetic Animism: Non-human Personhood and the Internet,* in «Digital Existence: Ontology, Ethics and Transcendence in Digital Culture», London, Routledge, 2018, pp. 227-241, here p. 235.

86   *Ibidem*.

87   *Ibidem*.

net and virtual communities, first, and of virtual, augmented and mixed reality, today, have allowed the affirmation of practices of use, but also of new belief systems, faiths, rituals and myths that have not always been circumscribed to the context of traditional religions.

Evidently, especially in recent years, religious institutions have resorted to the design of spiritual experiences in immersive realities on several occasions, a trajectory of investment that seems to be gaining more and more attention in the face of the emerging 'metaverse' and the commercialization of virtual and mixed reality devices.

But the most highlighted datum by research on spiritual experience in immersive realities is that relating to the emergence of religious meanings attributed to the digital medium in various spheres of scientific culture, rather than the remediation of traditional religions. In this sense, immersive and virtual realities seem to clear customs not so much as a new version of paganism, as was the case with technopaganism, but rather a cybernetic spirituality ascribed to the computational-algorithmic medium, a form of spirituality embodied not by a body, but by an artificial interconnected system. As Pärna wrote (2010), processes of meaning-making are still influenced by myths and magical thinking, and even what is conventionally considered to be the secular world – areas outside the boundaries of religious institutions and the reach of traditional religious teachings – is marked by religion[88].

The most striking aspect of this phenomenon is the shift in scholarly attention from the sociality of virtual communities to the sensitive experience of virtual realities. This does not necessarily mean a lack of sociality in immersive realities, but rather points to the emergence of a new form of human-machine relationality. This is even clearer today with artificial intelligence agencies and the integration of robots in religious rituals, with the management of deceased people's profiles on social media, with the ethical questions revolving around the design of so-called «digital twins» – in which it is still plausible to attribute religious and spiritual significance for the human being.

---

[88]   K. Pärna, *Believing in the Net. Implicit Religion and the Internet Hype 1994-2001*, Leiden, Leiden University Press, 2010.