
MATERIALITY, RELIGION AND THE DIGITAL: A THEORETICAL EXPLORATION OF MATERIAL RELIGION IN IMMERSIVE PLATFORMS

Victoria Dos Santos,
Eduardo Cruz

Introduction

With the widespread adoption and continuous advancement of computational technologies, nearly every religion has established a presence in online spaces. This deep shift in the religious landscape has been extensively explored by scholars of digital religion, a relatively young field of study focused on examining religion in the light of our media-saturated society. This field sees contemporary religious practices and beliefs are shaped by the interplay between online and offline contexts, which, rather than opposing one another, continuously intersect and influence each other. As Heidi Campbell assures, “scholars engaged in digital religion studies recognize that religion, as practiced within our current social and cultural milieu, is increasingly influenced and informed by interactions with computer-mediated digital technologies.”¹ Therefore, “religious individuals, institutions, and understandings are

¹ Heidi A. Campbell, “The Dynamic Future of Digital Religion Studies,” in *Stepping Back and Looking Ahead: Twelve Years of Studying Religious Contact at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg Bochum*, ed. Maren Freudenberg, Frederik Elwert, Tim Karis, Martin Radermacher, and Jens Schlamelcher (BRILL eBooks, 2023), 219, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004549319_009.

all impacted by the social-technical infrastructure and ethos of the network society.”²

Although religious practices in virtual platforms are currently on the rise, growing phenomenon, there is still a persistent conception of on-line experiences as artificial or less real, diminishing their value and authenticity. This situation, together with the utopianism often projected on computer technology, has produced too much speculation about the future of religion and how digital contexts are transforming the foundations and practice of religion in the 21st century.³ Thus, scholars of this field have been providing epistemological strategies to understand the migration and variations of religious practices when they interact with computational media, showing how religion has just been changing instead of disappearing with the presence of digital technology⁴ welcoming “alternative ways of being religious.”⁵ This can be seen in how religious actors and organizations can develop spiritual experiences on virtual platforms while also building identity, community, and authority.⁶

The context that most likely better reaffirmed the entanglement between computer technology and religion was the COVID-19 pandemic and the way it radically pushed several religious communities around the world to find online strategies to substitute physical interactions.⁷ Digital environments became not merely an option, but the only pos-

² Ibid.

³ Heidi A. Campbell, “Introduction,” in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi Campbell and Ruth Tsuria (London: Routledge, 2013).

⁴ Lars De Wildt and Stef Aupers, “Playing the Other: Role-playing Religion in Video-games,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 5–6 (30 August 2018): 867–84, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549418790454>.

⁵ Katja Rakow, “Religion 2.0: Thinking about religion through technology,” in *Writing the Liberal Arts and Sciences: Truth, Dialogue, and Historical Consciousness*, ed. M. Bouquet, A. Meijer, and C. Sanders (Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 89.

⁶ Mia Lövhelm, “Mediatization of Religion: A Critical Appraisal,” *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* 12, no. 2 (June 1, 2011): 153–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2011.579738>; Radde-Antweiler, Kerstin, “How to Study Religion and Video Gaming,” in Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, *Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion* (Routledge, 2017), 207–16, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315518336-13>; Wendi Bellar and Heidi A. Campbell, *Digital Religion: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003058465>.

⁷ Giulia Evolvi, “Religion and the Internet: Digital Religion, (Hyper)Mediated Spaces, and Materiality,” *Zeitschrift Für Religion Gesellschaft Und Politik* 6, no. 1 (19 October 2021): 9–25, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41682-021-00087-9>.

sible scenario where people could approach their traditions, maintain community boundaries, and practice their faith, adapting themselves to virtual platforms through creative and even disruptive modalities. We witnessed many churches launching livestream Masses, virtual funerals in social media sites, sacred Sufi dances through VR technology, pagan witches performing rituals in Second Life, to name a few actions. Even though those years disrupted social life, online religious strategies did mean a lot to the faithful.

This broader consideration of virtual environments as affordable media for everyday religion can be addressed from the theory of mediation, in which media in general serve as a way believers can approach religious experiences.⁸ Mediation theory addresses objects, texts, bodies, and spaces working as media, as a constitutive part of religion itself⁹ rather than tools¹⁰ that have an impact on religion.¹¹ In the case of digital media, for instance, can provide other dimensions of experience when taking part in spiritual performances. At the same time, as Hoover and Echchaibi assert in their theory of “the third space of digital religion,”¹² many online spaces help people articulate what religion means to them while shaping and transforming religious cultures in the process. In such a way, the digital, instead of being just a mere

⁸ Birgit Meyer, “Mediation and Immediacy: Sensational Forms, Semiotic Ideologies and the Question of the Medium,” *Social Anthropology* 19, (2011): 23–39, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8676.2010.00137.x>.

⁹ Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, “Embodiment,” in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi Campbell and Ruth Tsuria (London: Routledge, 2013), 103–20, 108.

¹⁰ From this perspective, the term “media” is broadly understood as encompassing all devices that help people experience transcendence, something that we regard as intrinsic to what religion is all about. Media’s nature is not “reducible to the object, the “stuff” that they constitute (a primary level), but encompass several levels: their materiality, their technological affordances [...], the ways in which they are deployed in religious practice, the sensory response they elicit, how their meaning is interpreted by their users and beholders, and the authorization process they entail.” Cf. Jessie Pons, “Religion, Media, and Materiality. Introduction,” *Entangled Religions* 11, no. 3 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.46586/er.11.2023.11430>.

¹¹ Knut Lundby and Giulia Evolvi, “Theoretical Frameworks for Approaching Religion and New Media,” in *Digital Religion* (Routledge, 2021), 233–49, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429295683-23>.

¹² Stewart M. Hoover and Nebil Echchaibi, “Introduction: Media Theory and the Third Spaces of Digital Religion,” in *The Third Spaces of Digital Religion*, ed. Stewart Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi (London: Routledge, 2023), 1–36.

‘information medium,’ has proven its potential for more interactive and participatory performances.¹³

When discussing the notion of mediation in religion we are irremediably bringing attention to its material dimension. By materiality, we refer to spaces, objects, bodies, texts, and other media, and how they make the transcendental or spiritual tangible and present within the physical world. A material approach “takes as its starting point the understanding that religion becomes concrete and palpable through people, their practices and use of things, and is part and parcel of power structures.”¹⁴ Some of the media that can better portray materiality online are 3D social virtual worlds,¹⁵ which have become highly popular for religious and spiritual interests.¹⁶ Similar to other contemporary media, such as digital games, 3D social virtual platforms offer high levels of immersivity, interactivity, and agency by embodying avatars in customizable spaces. As it will be described below, these features foster deeper interactions between users and the virtual environment, enabling deeper engagement with the objects and elements existing in those spaces.

With these introductory remarks in mind, the central questions this paper aims to theoretically address are the following: How do rituals in virtual platforms enable the articulation of material culture online? In what ways are these platforms negotiated across different religious traditions? How do these practices of mediation affect the way digital media is addressed? We also propose that, since any religious experience inherently requires a material dimension, the focus should move away

¹³ Christopher Helland, “Online Religion/Religion Online and Virtual Communities,” in *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, ed. Jeffrey Hadden and Douglas Cowan (London: JAI Press/Elsevier Science, 2000), 205–223.

¹⁴ Birgit Meyer, *Mediation and the Genesis of Presence: Towards a Material Approach to Religion* (Universiteit Utrecht: Faculteit Geesteswetenschappen, 2012), 7.

¹⁵ These virtual worlds are 3D interactive systems enabling users to build and personalize their avatars, their own virtual spaces, and objects. There, users can communicate and collaborate with others and develop a variety of sociocultural practices.

¹⁶ Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, “Religion is Becoming Virtualised. Introduction to the Special Issue on Religion in Virtual Worlds,” in *Being Virtually Real? Virtual Worlds from a Cultural Studies’ Perspective*, ed. Kerstin Radde-Antweiler (Heidelberg: Heidelberg journal of Religions on the Internet, 2008), 1–6, <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/volltexte/2008/8294/pdf/Radde.pdf> 2008.

from questioning the authenticity of religion in digital environments. Instead, the focus should center on examining the dynamic negotiations between religious traditions, users, and virtual platforms, exploring how these interactions enable the expression and embodiment of religious materiality in online spaces. To do so, we will first introduce what religious materiality is and how we can understand it in the online context. Then the focus moves on to ritual practices taking place in 3D social virtual platforms, which are the media where one can better observe online sensuous interactions. We will conclude with a reflection on how to address materiality through digital media.

Conceptualizing material religion

In the introduction of their volume *Materiality and the Study of Religion*, Hutchings and McKenzie highlight how ‘religion’ and ‘materiality’ are, in fact, interrelated concepts, since they both involve bodily aspects, objects, spaces, and performances.¹⁷ Even more clearly, conceiving any religious structure is impossible without materiality, since all religions are understood “in relation to the media of its materiality”¹⁸. The ‘material turn’ in the study of religion has opened new avenues for examining religious objects, viewing them as more than mere decorative or descriptive elements separated from what religion truly is. Anthropologist David Morgan has extensively contributed to integrating the notion of material culture into religious studies, which was downplayed in the past ignored in favor of other aspects of religion, such as beliefs, literary sources, and philosophical debates.¹⁹

For Morgan, the material culture of religions is understood “in terms of several categories of practice that put images and objects to work as

¹⁷ Tim Hutchings and Joanne McKenzie, “Introduction,” in *Materiality and the Study of Religion: The Stuff of the Sacred*, ed. Tim Hutchings and Joanne McKenzie (New York: Routledge, 2017), 4.

¹⁸ Matthew Engelke, “Material Religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 209–229.

¹⁹ David Morgan, “Material Analysis and the Study of Religion,” in *Materiality and the Study of Religion: The Stuff of the Sacred*, ed. Tim Hutchings and Joanne McKenzie (New York: Routledge, 2017), 14.

ways of engaging the human body in the configuration of the sacred.”²⁰ The sacred here can be understood as any object or practice that secures the interconnection with agencies able to enhance life and charge it with purpose.²¹ More than objects, material culture is “it is the way in which an object participates in making and sustaining a life-world. To study religious material culture is to study how people build and maintain the cultural domains that are the shape of their social lives”.²² They are not simply ‘objects’ or ‘places’, but encompass more intricate elements, such as emotions, sensations, food, and “all manner of bodily practices regarding such things as prayer, purification, ritual eating, corporate worship, private study, pilgrimage, and so forth.”²³ Having said that, the embodied material dimension cannot be separated or ignored since it is deeply entangled with the existence and development of religion itself.

This is also considered in the theory of mediation, where “[a] materialized study of religion begins with the assumption that things, their use, their valuation, and their appeal are not something added to a religion but rather inextricable from it.”²⁴ Religious material culture occurs through practices of mediation, which stress “the connection between religious experiences and the realm of the sensorium and to assume a material culture perspective.”²⁵ According to Meyer, “a practice of mediation between humans and the professed transcendent [...] necessarily requires specific material media, that is, authorized forms through which the transcendent is being generated and becomes some-

²⁰ David Morgan, “The Material Culture of Lived Religions: Visuality and Embodiment,” originally published in *Mind and Matter: Selected Papers of Nordic Conference 2009. Studies in Art History* (Helsinki: Society of Art History, 2010), republished in *The Jugaad Project*, July 7, 2019, <https://www.thejugaadproject.pub/home/the-material-culture-of-lived-religions-visibility-and-embodiment>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Morgan, “Material Analysis and the Study of Religion,” 15.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Birgit Meyer, David Morgan, Crispin Paine and S. Brent Plate, “The Origin and Mission of Material Religion,” *Religion* 40, no. 3 (2010): 209, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.religion.2010.01.010>.

²⁵ Knut Lundby and Giulia Evolvi, “Theoretical Frameworks for Approaching Religion and New Media,” 238.

how tangible.”²⁶ When referring to certain material media becoming authorized forms, she includes a conventional notion of media, such as books, radio, TV, and computer technology, to basically all kinds of objects or spaces – such as plants, animals, or images – that transmit or mediate “the ‘here and now’ and a ‘beyond,’ between ‘immanent’ and ‘transcendent.’”²⁷

Bringing materiality to the fore, the discussion centers on how religions are practiced and experienced by individuals and communities through various mediation practices. Here, we highlight the term “lived religion,” which has been defined as the daily life of religious people.²⁸ In other words, lived religion is about “everyday religious experience, paying special attention to corporeality, symbolic objects, and discourse.”²⁹ This reflection is important because it takes us to the immanent frame of religion, where the surrounding materiality, including our own corporality, takes place. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body is embedded in this understanding of religion as ‘lived,’³⁰ where “practice and experience are connected through corporeality and symbolically lived materiality.”³¹

At the same time, lived religion approach “is attentive precisely to this dialectic between community traditions and personal choices (adaptations),”³² in ways that are not necessarily aligned with the institutionalized and official views of the sacred. Lived religion makes it possible to appreciate the dynamism of religious subjectivity, which often

²⁶ Birgit Meyer, “Material Mediations and Religious Practices of World-Making,” in *Religion Across Media: From Early Antiquity to Late Modernity*, ed. Knut Lundby (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 8.

²⁷ Birgit Meyer, “Religion as Mediation,” *Entangled Religions* 11, no. 3 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.13154/er.11.2020.8444>.

²⁸ Gustavo Morello, *Lived Religion in Latin America. An Enchanted Modernity* (Nueva York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 32.

²⁹ Lidia Rodríguez Fernández et al., “Lived religion y fenomenología de la religión: el caso latinoamericano,” *Revista de Estudios Sociales* [online] 82, no. 10 (2022): 27, <https://journals.openedition.org/revestudsoc/53104>.

³⁰ Kim Knibbe and Helena Kupari, “Theorizing Lived Religion: Introduction,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 35, no. 2 (2020): 157–176, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2020.1759897>.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

³² *Ibid.*

disrupts normative dynamics maintained by religious authorities. That is to say, everyday experiences are about how religious actors encounter and relate with the sacred through acts of mediation that can both follow tradition and foster innovation. In both approaches – traditional or innovative, spaces, things, or practices involving the body acquire new meanings that otherwise would not exist in – as Eliade would say – in the profane world.

What we are also highlighting here is that practices of mediation evolve and differ, not only based on the specific religious tradition but also on how individuals subjectively engage with their faith and the historical and social context where they are situated. These variations in mediation tactics are evident when noticing the new spaces, objects, performances, and environments that are integrated into a given religion, shaping how it is experienced and expressed in daily life. Religions are not static, and they can adapt by integrating media belonging to a specific period.³³ As Meyer assures “[t]he availability and negotiation of media fuels processes of religious transformation and shapes the ways in which religious groups are positioned in society.”³⁴ These changes are perceptible when examining how traditional forms of authority, community and identity are being challenged. At the same time, all media “are distinct in their essence and incommensurate: they comprise many variations (...), each have their own valence and agencies, impacting the hearer or viewers in distinct ways.”³⁵

This relatedness between material culture and the adoption of new practices of mediation prepares our discussion to address how individuals and communities have assigned other ways of relating to virtual platforms as spaces where religion can take place. Computer media is currently a ubiquitous technology that it has challenged traditional modes of living while also proposing new environments and modes of

³³ The invention of Gutenberg’s printing press in the mid-fifteenth century, for instance, notably influenced the later appearance of Protestantism in Europe. Thanks to a greater spread of anticlerical ideas, Martin Luther distributed his influential theses against papal indulgences. In such a way, it can be affirmed that each technological innovation comes with distinct socio-cultural changes, fully including the religious domain.

³⁴ Meyer, “Religion as Mediation.”

³⁵ David Morgan, “A Generative Entanglement: Word and Image in Roman Catholic Devotional Practice,” *Entangled Religions* 11, no.3 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.46586/er.11.2020.8443>.

experience. We are immersed in a hybrid scenario where “the digital” is embedded in almost all human practices, including religion. We cannot simply ignore the aspects belonging to “the material” when we are referring to religions taking place on online platforms, specifically rituals and other daily activities of religious expression. Traditions, we can assert, are actualized through variations that challenge the purported unmovable and static condition of religion. Applying these ideas to digital environments, a “material religion” approach would explore how users encounter and re-signify virtual platforms through creative engagements able to resonate with their religious or spiritual traditions. A material approach would also look at the different ways bodies and spaces are constructed online, and how they are experienced during practices such as rituals.

Rethinking religious materiality online

As mentioned above, in the past three decades a relatively new field of study has emerged among religious scholars – that of digital religion. It focuses on addressing the interactions and hybridizations occurring between computer technology and religion. Digital religion has passed through different stages.³⁶ First, it went from considering the internet as an alternative reality, completely disconnected from our real lives, and where all religious manifestations occurring there didn’t have any type of consequence on the real offline world.³⁷ Progressively, the field of study evolved into what Heidi Campbell, one of the founders of the discipline, has defined as “a framework for articulating the evolution of religious practices online which are linked to online and offline contexts simultaneously.”³⁸ For the scholars in this area, there is no clear

³⁶ Morten Hojsgaard and Margit Warburg, “Introduction: waves of research,” in *Religion and cyberspace*, ed. Morten Hojsgaard and Margit Warburg (London: Routledge, 2005), 1–11; Mia Lövhelm and Heidi Campbell, “Considering Critical Methods and Theoretical Lenses in Digital Religion Studies,” *New Media & Society* 19, no. 1 (2017): 5–14, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816649911>.

³⁷ Brenda Brasher, *Give me that online religion* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

³⁸ Heidi Campbell, “Community,” in *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds*, ed. Heidi Campbell (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1.

distinction between religious actions that exist online and those that occur offline,³⁹ since both contexts are constantly interacting with each other.

To what has been shown so far, digital media has progressed beyond merely examining the ‘digitalization of religion,’ into a more profound understanding of how religion today is actively shaped by digital technologies. Digital religion does not simply refer to religion being performed online, but to how the characteristics of digital technology are diluted in the ways religion manifests in digital environments.⁴⁰ In this sense, digital media not only transform traditional religious practices but also foster the emergence of entirely new forms of religious expressions and experiences. The approach of digital religion enables a broader understanding of how religious groups relate with virtual platforms, considering that these media are not all the same and that their ‘uses’ may vary according to the users’ religious tradition and their own spiritual needs. We will explore these aspects later in this section.

Although there has been a notable use of digital technologies by religious authorities and scholars, when it comes to practices in virtual platforms the prejudices persist. When the digital is considered as immaterial and disembodied, it becomes challenging to envision any form of authentic religious engagement within it. However, the COVID-19 lockdown was able to prove how several religious practices – such as rituals, community meetings and other spiritual activities – dependent on spatial and bodily aspects, could be performed online. We are not asserting that online and offline practices are identical or that the online can embrace all the offline aspects. As McLuhan noted, every extension of human capability comes with a form of amputation, but why not also consider that each amputation brings about a new extension?⁴¹

³⁹ Christopher Helland, “Online Religion as Lived Religion: Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet,” *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 1, no. 1 (2005), <https://doi.org/10.11588/heidok.00005823>; Evolvi, “Religion and the Internet”; Piotr Siuda, “Mapping Digital Religion: Exploring the Need for New Typologies,” *Religions* 12, no. 6 (2021): 373, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12060373>.

⁴⁰ Christopher Helland, “Digital Religion,” in *Handbook of Religion and Society*, ed. David Yamane (Switzerland: Springer, 2016), 177–196, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-31395-5>.

⁴¹ Fragment taken from a lecture of Victor Krebs called “Virtuales, Digitales y Ubicuos” from the seminar Next: Imagining the Future, 2020. Caracas, Venezuela, <https://www.youtube.com/>

While many digital objects may appear to be mere reproductions or imitations of their offline counterparts, the digital realm generates its own unique kinds of aura. Furthermore, they can offer experiences that might be challenging to replicate offline. For example, performances streamed on YouTube can combine music and visuals, providing immersive levels of engagement that transcend traditional formats.

Digital networks constitute, therefore, a new dimension of the real⁴² where the online and the offline are not completely separated but they complement each other. Following this, we can affirm that the digital sphere can be experienced as something more than an information medium to become, instead, a playground for creative religious expression and development. Helland's⁴³ categorization of *religion online* and *online religion* can be very illustrative for this reflection. *Religion online* can provide interaction and even immersion, but these activities are still tied up to offline practices for instance, churches or religious communities can use the medium to improve communication among the members or "to support their hierarchical 'top down' religious worldview."⁴⁴ In contrast, *online religion* describes a dynamic and interactive way of engaging with digital platforms, where online environments are recognized as spaces capable of supporting authentic and meaningful religious experiences.

Recognizing that online religious practices do indeed occur implies acknowledging the existence of a material dimension within digital spaces. While this assertion follows a logical progression – since, as noted, 'materiality is constitutive of religion and life itself'⁴⁵ – this rendering of the material has often been overlooked, with online manifestations often seen as inauthentic. Consequently, research into digital religion must critically engage with concepts of digital materiality and embodiment, reflecting on how, for most religious traditions, having a digital presence

watch?v=qNxbKyXw_9c&list=PLqEw2exohaHBgAVhY3LVC7GDijvKteyoy&index=20.

⁴² Fabrizio Vecoli, *La Religione ai Tempi del Web* (Roma–Bari: Laterza, 2013), 7.

⁴³ Helland, "Online Religion as Lived Religion."

⁴⁴ Idem, 5.

⁴⁵ Manuel A. Vázquez, "The Persistence, Ubiquity, and Dynamicity of Materiality: Studying Religion and Materiality Comparatively," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Materiality*, ed. Vasudha Narayanan (Hoboken: Wiley, 2020), 8.

is no longer optional and how the online realm is becoming increasingly intertwined with everyday reality. As Campbell asserts:

Traditionally, the study of material religion has been confined to the offline world. However, there is a growing interest in how material religion is manifesting online with emerging studies exploring this new dimension. Consequently, this highlights a greater awareness of the relationship between religion, technology, and culture and how material religion permeates both digital and physical spheres.⁴⁶

To explore more broadly how religion is not only portrayed but also practiced in virtual platforms, rituals represent an ideal object of study because they highlight the relevance of the material and spatial aspects of digital environments. Among all religious activities, rituals⁴⁷ are ultimately the most interactive and immersive ones, expressing certain meanings and effects⁴⁸ and, consequently, in which one can experience transformation and religion itself. From the perspective of digital religion, there are two key aspects that can help us to understand the poetics – the process of creation – of rituals performed online: The first one is how digital religion is profoundly embedded with the creative and sometimes affective ‘appropriation’ of virtual platforms by users, enabling the manifestation of religious practices and the connection with the sacred. The second one is related to how the online context transcends its merely utilitarian use to become an environment where religious expressions are not only portrayed but lived in embodied and sensuous ways. Through Hoover and Echchaibi’s *Third Spaces of Digital Religion*⁴⁹ and Heidi Campbell’s *Religious–Social Shaping of Digi-*

⁴⁶ Heidi Campbell and Louise Connelly, “Religion and Digital Media Studying Materiality in Digital Religion,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Materiality*, ed. Vasudha Narayanan (Hoboken: Wiley, 2020), 471.

⁴⁷ Rituals are one of the most outstanding aspects of religion, since they represent the practice that best legitimates, renews, and portrays the relationship between the believer and the spiritual path. Analyzing rituals, not only in terms of content but as a meaning-making dynamic, is important because they reveal values at their deepest level, allowing us to understand the essential constitution of human societies (Bryan R. Wilson, *Contemporary Transformations of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 241).

⁴⁸ Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 138.

⁴⁹ Stewart M. Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi, “Media theory and the ‘third spaces of digital religion,’” *The Center for Media, Religion, and Culture*, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.13140/>

tal Technology⁵⁰ we will be able to address this complex intertwining of computer technology and material culture of lived religion.

The third spaces of digital religion, expresses the spaces emerging from the engagement of religion and digital media. Third spaces are social dimensions created by the users together with the technological environment, they exist between the private and the public as alternatives for everyday expressions of spirituality and tradition. There, “individuals use the technical capacities of the digital to imagine social and cultural configurations beyond existing binaries of the physical versus the virtual and the real versus the proximal religious experience.”⁵¹ The importance of these spaces is that they enable awareness about the dynamism of everyday religion and how subjects imagine, produce and navigate new religious and spiritual places.⁵² Hoover and Echchaibi's theory “accounts for a explore the forms of the religious (or spiritual) that are developing in the between-ness of the digital spaces accorded by this new form of media.”⁵³

On the other hand, Campbell's theory of religious–social shaping of digital technology (RSST) can help us to better understand how there are different experiences of the internet and how, depending on the religion, digital media are not perceived equally. According to RSST, religious communities do not reject new forms of technology outright, rather they experience a negotiation process in which both members or leaders determine the effects technology might have on their community.⁵⁴ Therefore, individuals, communities and institutions are all impacted by the “social-technical infrastructure and ethos of the network society but in different ways.”⁵⁵

The different affordances of virtual platforms for religious pursuits do certainly redefine our understanding of how religion works but also

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⁵⁰ Heidi Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We Are One in the Network* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).

⁵¹ Hoover and Echchaibi, “Media theory and the ‘third spaces of digital religion’,” 14.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Helland, “Digital Religion,” 183.

⁵⁴ Knut Lundby and Giulia Evolvi, “Theoretical Frameworks for Approaching Religion and New Media.”

⁵⁵ Campbell, “The Dynamic Future of Digital Religion Studies,” 219.

the ways religion affects people's technological choices concerning computer media. Buddhists, Catholics, Neopagans and Muslims, just to name a few, might have different options about the media they choose and the types of relationships they establish with them. For example, the interaction that a Christian might have with a given platform to perform a cult might be radically different to how Buddhists relate with the same media to perform Cybersangas. Having said that, the digital can no longer be seen as a single, monolithic entity. Instead, users experience different aspects of the digital world depending on the spaces they engage with based on their own values and context. As RSST has shown, users can relate to and even understand particular types of digital media when they are reinterpreted or seen under the logic of a certain religion. This refers to the agency of religious communities in employing new technologies as suitable platforms for religious engagements.⁵⁶ In short, the material dimension of religion happens online by means of the user's subjectivity, the potentialities of the platform itself and the influence of a given religious path.

Regarding the type of media generally used for sensuous and immersive religious practices, 3D social virtual platforms are among the most popular to depict and practice religion. These platforms have been spreading their applications to cultural contexts, having a significant impact on the development and perception of religious experience. We can notice a variety of traditional and nontraditional religions using these immersive media as a tool to congregate and practice their faith and as a gateway to different 'spiritual' realities.⁵⁷ In the next section we will briefly introduce 3D social virtual platforms and how they can be an excellent example to explore the ways materiality can be manifested in computer-based scenarios when they are addressed by religious individuals or communities.

⁵⁶ Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online*, 2.

⁵⁷ Ryan Hornbeck and Justin L. Barrett, "Virtual reality as a spiritual experience: a perspective from the cognitive science of religion," *Northern Lights Film and Media Studies Yearbook* 6, no. 1 (2008): 75, https://doi.org/10.1386/nl.6.1.75_1.

The case of 3D social virtual platforms

Given their interactive and immersive nature, 3D social virtual platforms are a highly attractive scene for practicing any intimal or personal activity, as in the case of spiritual traditions. During the last two decades, they have become a popular media among users wanting to experience virtual reality for social and cultural pursuits, having a significant impact upon religious experience, formation, and behavior. Due to their potentialities in offering embodied and sensuous experiences, VR-based platforms are one of the media allowing more agency and interaction for users. Many of the activities taking place in these virtual worlds possess a high level of transparency thanks to features such as haptic feedback, lifelike graphics and surround sound. Virtual Reality today can take the user to simulate offline scenarios, or it can create new ones with 3D objects and other virtual elements.

Platforms like Second Life,⁵⁸ Horizon Worlds, VRChat, and RecRoom, have demonstrated they are suitable for practically all types of social and cultural activities. In these media, users can not only customize the configurations of the virtual environment and their avatars but also engage with digital objects, interact with non-playable characters (NPCs), and communicate with other users' avatars. Their popularity among religious groups is such that practically every world religion has followers on these platforms. Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Neopagans are just one of the many traditions addressing these media as spaces of worship, study groups, or meeting points to connect with people practicing a similar faith.

These VR-based social platforms enable a dynamic and sensory component, which can better portray how religious rituals are experienced and creatively adapted into online spaces. Therefore, because online rituals influence not only how religion is practiced but also how digital media is seen and addressed, they might also welcome new ontological ways of relating to digital media, not simply as instruments but as

⁵⁸ Christopher Helland, "Ritual," in *Digital religion: understanding religious practices in new media worlds*, ed. Heidi Campbell (London: Routledge, 2013), 25–40; Tom Boellstorff, "Placing the virtual body: avatar, chora, cypherg," in *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Body and Embodiment*, ed. E. Frances Mascia-Lees (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 504–520.

valid environments able to provide authentic spiritual experiences. As proposed above, this paper argues that the interactive and immersive nature of VR⁵⁹ allows for particular new ways of embodied and participatory human-computer interactions, enabling the manifestation of a specific type of materiality characteristics of the online realm. Such a perspective should challenge the dichotomy between online and offline spaces, encouraging a more integrated understanding of coexistence. At the end, human experience consists of “multiple realities,”⁶⁰ “countless, separate social worlds, each of them with its own internal logic and principles of organization.”⁶¹

One of the most interesting aspects of these virtual worlds is avatar embodiment and customization. In the field of embodiment and digital immersion, studies have shown how avatars⁶² allow users to make themselves present in the virtual environment,⁶³ enabling creative manifestations of identity⁶⁴ and vividly conveying emotions and experiences.⁶⁵ In these ways, avatars are seen as contemporary immersive virtual reality devices capable of bi-directional changes,⁶⁶ influencing both the online and offline realities of users. Nonetheless, research on how avatar

⁵⁹ Shailey Minocha, Minh Tran and Ahmad John Reeves, “Conducting Empirical Research in 3D Virtual Worlds: Experiences from two projects in Second Life,” *Journal of virtual worlds research* 3, no. 1 (2010), <https://jvwr-ojs-utexas.tdl.org/jvwr/article/view/811>.

⁶⁰ Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann, *The Structures of the Life-world, Volume I* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

⁶¹ Mary Chayko, “What is Real in the Age of Virtual Reality? ‘Retraining’ Frame Analysis for a Technological World,” *Symbolic Interaction* 16, no. 2 (1993): 172, <https://doi.org/10.1525/si.1993.16.2.171>.

⁶² Avatars can be understood as “graphic representation that acts as a digital proxy through which internet users, a cybernetic community or a computer interface (as in the case of video games), negotiate their presence and interact with synthetic objects or other avatars of the digital world” Cf. Andrea Pinotti, “Procuratori del Sé: Dall’avatar all’avatarizzazione,” in *Visual Studies: L'avvento di Nuovi Paradigmi*, ed. Tommaso Gatti and Dalia Maini (Milan: Mimesis, 2019), 28.

⁶³ T. L. Taylor, “Living Digitally: Embodiment in Virtual Worlds,” in *The Social Life of Avatars: Presence and interaction in shaded virtual environments*, ed. R. Schroeder (London: Springer, 2002): 40–62, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4471-0277-9_3.

⁶⁴ Franco Faccennini, “Digital Avatars,” *Philosophy Today* 65, no. 3 (2021): 599–617.

⁶⁵ Donghee Shin, “Empathy and embodied experience in virtual environment: to what extent can virtual reality stimulate empathy and embodied experience?,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, 78 (2018): 64–73.

⁶⁶ Pinotti, “Procuratori del Sé.”

embodiment in immersive virtual platforms can produce lived religious experiences has not received enough academic attention. As Radde-Antweiler wrote, “the majority of research on embodiment, religion, and digital culture was focused on linguistic or visual communication”⁶⁷ although “with the invention of research on video games and religion, the concept of embodiment became more prominent.”⁶⁸

Besides, the fact that virtual spaces can be creatively transformed and personalized, allows a higher degree of embodiment and the users’ agency towards the digital world, their objects, and other people’s avatars. Due to such characteristics, these media have become particularly effective for religious expressions such as rituals. Based on Kim Knott’s⁶⁹ consideration of space as “a medium in which religion is situated,” Evolvi proposes that “space is created through interpersonal relations and embodied experiences, and includes both religious and non-religious manifestations.”⁷⁰ Virtual spaces, therefore, are modified, defined, and perceived through the active presence of users. Their religious experiences and expectations are the ones assigning those spaces sacred value. Due to the increasing immersive, interactive, and imaginative effect of virtual reality technology, game spaces can recreate in users a primal experience of intimacy with the surrounding world, allowing them to express their own subjectivity and to feel they “are” actually there.

Considering such characteristics, it is not a surprise that VR becomes a coherent and powerful tool to experience religion. The rapid innovation and exponential presence of the digital context in social areas has encompassed and merged with a wide variety of religious and spiritual activities: from Christian sermons and Buddhist meditations chambers to Muslims prayers and Neopagan rituals, these computer technologies are present in users’ decisions. VR technologies allow users to engage with them and propose strategies to experience religious traditions in virtual environments – indistinctively of their level of institutionality, offering a wide array of methods for spiritual expression which can become officially accepted. On such a way, we could affirm

⁶⁷ Radde-Antweiler, “Embodiment,” 109.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Kim Knott, *The location of religion: a spatial analysis* (London: Routledge, 2014), 3.

⁷⁰ Evolvi, “Religion and the internet,” 16.

that the more a religion is wired the more it will incorporate the values of the software it embraces.⁷¹

Besides understanding how religious traditions impact users' negotiations towards a given technology, we could expand Campbell's theory of religious-social shaping of digital technology (RSST) by asking how religion can determine the integration of a given technology into a religious system. In conclusion, we propose to shift the focus from questioning the authenticity of online materiality or the validity of online religious practices. Instead, attention should be directed toward understanding the strategies that religious actors employ to ritualize virtual environments, transforming the instrumental use of computer technology into a dynamic and 'lived' space for spiritual possibilities. Furthermore, VR technologies also generate a real sense of being present in a virtual scenario, as well as natural responses to the experiences which are being produced. Experiences that can be lived may be genuine and real.

Consider, for instance, the Christian community known as 'VR Church.' Its founder, Pastor DJ Soto, conducted a virtual baptism where the avatar of the person being baptized was submerged in virtual water, while Bishop Soto shared messages about God's infinite love. Similarly, in the Neopagan community 'Pagans in VR,' also on VRChat, members organize and perform collective religious rituals throughout the year, crafting digital representations of magical tools and altars. These examples demonstrate how radically different religious traditions – the first one primarily rooted in theological orientation and the second one centered on ritual performance rather than belief⁷² – can creatively integrate digital innovation, reinterpreting virtual environments as sacred spaces for spiritual expression.

Building on this perspective, religious practices in virtual environments can be significantly enhanced by the interactive and immersive qualities these spaces offer. They should not be addressed as substitutes of offline performances, but as environments that can enable us to see

⁷¹ Rachel Wagner, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality* (London: Routledge, 2012).

⁷² Sabina Magliocco, "Reclamation, appropriation and the ecstatic imagination in modern pagan ritual," in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, ed. James R. Lewis (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 223–240, <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004163737.i-650.69>.

and hear in ways previously unimagined. In few words, VR based platforms can allow users to reach levels of experience that would not exist in our physical offline reality, expanding the boundaries of what can be imagined and experienced.

Some redefinitions of digital materiality

While immersive virtual platforms can convey a sense of body and space, embracing the idea of ‘online materiality’ remains challenging, particularly when our interactions with it are not as tangible or direct. The digital, however, is not so distant from the notions of ‘touchable’ perception. In the digital age, virtual tools and interfaces are actually operated through hands, meaning that they are, in a certain sense, touched by us. Besides, if digital culture is taken etymologically it would mean ‘the culture of fingers’ since the sense of the world *digitus* is not only that of ‘number’ but also ‘finger’.⁷³

In his paper “How Digital Worlds Become Material,” Richard Kedzior also explores broader ways of addressing ‘online materiality.’ It is “not just a projection of socio-cultural conditions, but also an active agent of change able to structure action, create new meanings, and enable social connections.”⁷⁴ For scholars like Miller,⁷⁵ “different understandings of immateriality become expressed through material forms” and religion is a powerful example of this when in many traditions the approach to the sacred is mediated through temples, sacred objects, or rituals. From this perspective, “the material is not only what is tangible or physical, but also what is culturally significant, meaningful, or consequential.”⁷⁶ As Miller argues,⁷⁷ the definition of materiality needs to consider “the large compass of materiality, the ephemeral, the imagi-

⁷³ Alessandra Violi et al., “Introduction: Learning from Stone,” in *Bodies of Stone in the Media, Visual Culture and the Arts*, ed. Pietro Conte, Andrea Pinotti, Barbara Grespi, and Alessandra Violi (Amsterdam: University Press, 2020) 9–18.

⁷⁴ Richard Kedzior, *How Digital Worlds Become Material. An Ethnographic and Netnographic Investigation in Second life* (Helsinki: Edita Prima Ltd, 2014), 15.

⁷⁵ Daniel Miller, *Materiality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 4.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

nary, the biological, and the theoretical; all that which would have been external to the simple definition of an artifact”.

Digital materiality emerges “as a set of arrangements between intangible graphical representations, digital artifacts, or simulations, experienced by consumers through the mediation of computer screens.”⁷⁸ Although they may lack physical material properties, digital elements can still be considered material when viewed through the lens of their practical instantiation and symbolic significance.⁷⁹ Thus, in the process of digital consumption “what matters most about an artifact is not what it’s made out of, but what it allows people to do.”⁸⁰

Conclusions

It has already been shown how digital media, as well as the increasing state of connectivity of individuals, have fostered spiritual practices that are emerging and developing in the cyberspace. Traditional religions have penetrated this digital environment, and other ones, not properly institutionalized, have found the right terrain to settle and expand. Social functioning and cultural manifestations were both absorbed and disrupted by the popularization of digital technological artefacts, and, in turn, they accelerated a general virtualization of objects, experiences and relationships.

Spiritual and religious experiences that could have been considered as science fiction narratives in other decades are common practice nowadays: virtual pilgrimage to religious places, humans extended in virtual bodies performing rituals in fully immersive digital ecosystems, and creations of sacred spaces through the initiative and intentions of actors. However, can we consider as ‘spiritually valid’ these types of experiences, mediated by VR technologies and synthetically generated by a software? How do the process of development and propagation of

⁷⁸ Kedzior, *How Digital Worlds Become Material*, 15.

⁷⁹ Paul Leonardi, “Digital Materiality: How artefacts without matter, matter,” *First Monday* 15, no. 6 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v15i6.3036>.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

cyberspace and virtual reality technologies create new strategies for the diffusion of faith?

In sum, this paper intended to offer an outline of some theoretical reflections that work as heuristic devices to address these questions properly. Religious practices are not only embodied, sensorial and emotional but also linguistic activities capable of constructing individuals and the social world. Meaning that religious material culture online does not conceive virtual platforms as tools with fixed characteristics or uses. Instead, through affective and sensuous interactions with digital media, they acquire new dimensions of meaning. Therefore, given platforms may become sacred spaces, virtual objects can become ritualistic or worship elements, and avatars can become extended bodies.

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