RELIGION IN LATE MODERN SOCIETY

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CONTENTS

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Ethical and Religious Challenges within Metaverse[1]

Abstract: The current crisis has pointed out weaknesses and raised issues concerning the religious situation in the newly formed circumstances – in conditions of pandemic, war, isolation. The Internet with its growing influence on social patterns, and the metaverse as a proposed unique virtual world which is assumed to be the future in development of the global network, represent a new space for these challenges. Given that there is still no ethical consensus on virtual world issues, this paper discusses the possible implications of interactions in the virtual reality of the metaverse. Based on the current factual situation and assumptions, an analysis of the dichotomous relationship between the actual religious rites practice in the physical world and the expected virtual religious practice in the metaverse, was performed. Theoretical bases have been laid for further considerations of the influence of the metaverse phenomenon on religious behavior/practice, and on individual and social life, as well as for considerations of the responses that religion should give to the topical, set challenges. It was concluded that under certain conditions the metaverse can be an opportunity to respond to some of the challenges that religious communities face.

Keywords: metaverse, religion, Internet, pandemic, challenges.

Introduction

The contemporary crisis caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic, the resulting isolation, and, more recently, armed conflict on European soil, are affecting Europe on several levels. There is an ongoing change in social patterns

on the European continent and the world. The Internet has become one of the main channels of communication and informing, irreplaceable and necessary for modern people, which has made certain patterns of behavior and social interaction primary. Due to the current events, the issue of the metaverse as an assumed platform of virtual reality, which according to announcements should soon become real, is again at the center of attention.

The metaverse is described as the next step in the evolution of the Internet and is an online space that allows people to interact through socializing, work, or entertainment. It is accessed by means of specially designed glasses or bracelets, and is conceived as a social sphere in which users interact with each other with the help of personalized avatars, which makes the experience of the metaverse close to reality. The concept of the metaverse can be described as the binding of a large number of smaller digital worlds and experiences through technical standards that allow users to move between them, carrying their virtual identity, social connections, and possessions. The metaverse can be defined as a post-real universe in which physical reality is merged with digital and virtual reality in a multiuser environment (Mystakidis, 2022). A former Amazon Studios head of strategy, and a metaverse essayist Matthew Ball is widely quoted as defining the metaverse as „massively scaled and inter-operable network of real-time rendered 3D virtual worlds which can be experienced synchronously and persistently by an effectively unlimited number of users with an individual sense of presence, and with continuity of data, such as identity, history, entitlements, objects, communications, and payments" (Ball, 2021). However, the impression is that, for now, the whole concept of the metaverse is without a clear path between idea and reality. What is simply understandable is the idea of using it as advertising space in the future, which is causing quite a lot of interest from numerous companies.

The development of the idea of the metaverse

The origin of the concept and term metaverse is linked to the science fiction writer Neal Stephenson, who in his novel *Snow Crash* (1992) depicts a dystopian society where technology reaches its peak and creates more problems in human life than benefits (Stephenson, 1992). In response, he creates a parallel universe known as the metaverse, where people can forget their worries and fulfill their every wish (Tirado Morttiz, 2013).

The next important step in the evolution of the idea of "life" in virtual reality was the launch of an online multimedia platform in 2003 that allowed users to create their virtual representation, an avatar, and lead a "second life" in the virtual world. *Second Life* is also the name of this online platform which was developed at *Linden Lab* in San Francisco.[2] Interest in this project has grown again with the development of the idea and concept of the multiverse, considering that the platform represents its virtual world built only for social interaction. Users of the *Second Life* platform do not have a defined goal, as would be the case if it were a game, but the emphasis and focus are on mutual interaction and content freely generated by users. As such, the virtual world promised the realization of dreams. Residents are free to determine the meaning and purpose of their activities but also their moral suitability. Creating content in virtual reality is not limited, which implies that everything is allowed, even actions that would be interpreted as immoral and illegal in the real world (Gooskens, 2010). In August 2022, under the *Spirituality & Belief* section of the *Second Life* platform, there were 41 virtual destinations where residents can join the discussion groups or gathering spots where they are supposed to express and share their personal beliefs (*Second Life*, n.d).

Currently, the leading company in terms of developing the idea of the metaverse is Meta, the recent Facebook. In 2019, the virtual reality platform *Facebook Horizon* was launched, which soon became *Horizon Worlds* – a free game in virtual reality and a system for creating new games.[3] The founder, chairman and CEO of Meta, Mark Zuckerberg, explained that "metaverse is a vision that spans many companies — the whole industry" (Zuckerberg, 2021).

Ethical issues

Zuckerberg states that the metaverse will provide users with comfort and an intense experience of presence, similar to the natural presence (Zuckerberg, 2021). This kind of experience goes beyond the realm of simple entertainment. Entering virtual reality, that is, into the public space of the metaverse as its assumed future, also introduces a level of new ethical issues (Kenwright, 2018). Content creation without restrictions and limitations, and freedom in personal actions are circumstances under which the use of virtual reality can enter the sphere of unethical behavior (Ramirez, LaBarge, 2018). An example

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[2] See: https://secondlife.com/.
[3] See: https://www.oculus.com/horizon-worlds/.

of behavior in the virtual world that would be characterized as immoral in the real world is encouraging the sexual abuse of female computer simulations in a Japanese game (Gooskens, 2010). Although there is an awareness that such a gesture will neither physically nor emotionally endanger anyone directly, its ethicality is doubtful. While the intense and immersive experience of virtual reality is increasingly popular, the ethical complexities of the virtual world are a topic of much debate (Kenwright, 2018). One of the proposed models for the solution is the so-called "The Equivalence Principle," which in short, implies that everything that is prohibited and unethical in the real world should also be prohibited in virtual reality (Ramirez, LaBarge, 2018).

Instead of identity being built through long-term processes that begin at birth, it could become the subject of free and even random selection in the metaverse. If users of the metaverse are allowed to choose their personal representation without restrictions, can it actually lead to the discovery of true identity, an identity that an individual in the world longs for and seeks without forming it due to social, geographical, or cultural givens? The equality of all users, which has been an imperative of the metaverse since the very beginning, promises a liberating experience for users. It allows the judgment of an individual to be formed in relation to how the person wants to be seen, his or her character traits, and emotional and intellectual capacity, instead of the person being classified in advance according to his or her physical presentation or limitations. The imagined concept of a virtual place is a dream of a place where the hierarchies and limitations of the real world disappear, where everyone can be a hero and can realize their unfulfilled dreams. Therefore, traditional moral values do not have to automatically apply as such and be copied into virtual worlds (Kenwright, 2018). Although the metaverse is conceived as a virtual utopia that should bring a new quality to the lives of every user, the concept of the metaverse is imbued with numerous ethical questions for the solution of which it is necessary to find an adequate model.

If we take into account the experience gained in connection with the consequences of using social networks, we have witnessed that their platforms have become a breeding ground for violence and hate speech through abuse (Bond, Bushman, 2017; Khalafat et al., 2021). It is reasonable to expect that such patterns of behavior will become a reality in the metaverse as well, especially when it is taken into account that users will be anonymous, represented by their avatar. From the point of view of the acquired experience, in order to prevent this, it is necessary to define the ethical framework and establish restrictions and prohibitions by introducing appropriate regulations. Although

the causes of violent behavior can be varied, there is an established opinion about the connection between the perpetration of violence and exposure to violence in the media, digital media, and entertainment (Boyle, 2004; Carter, Weaver, 2003). Social networking platforms have administrators who are responsible for monitoring, following, and sanctioning any unacceptable behavior. Given that the metaverse is a reality whose functioning we can currently only have assumptions about, the issue of abuse and violence, that is, its prevention is a current ethical issue. In the digital era, organizations and individuals are obliged to respect ethical and professional responsibility towards the public sphere.

The issue of ownership structure and management represents another challenge that entails ethical and security issues such as the issue of personal data protection. If the metaverse is managed by technological giants, old problems such as compromised data privacy, theft, manipulation, and favoring of certain content and even opinions will remain current. The business interests of large corporations should also be taken into account, as it is expected that their business interests will take precedence. The politics of multinational companies is not focused on solving real-world problems because their interest is profit. This current issue related to the Internet will not bypass the metaverse. It is estimated that by 2024, the tangible assets of the metaverse traded on the stock market will grow to $80 billion in assets under management (Sin, Kanterman, 2022). The metaverse is conceived as a world of equality for all, but the practical realization so far does not promise equality in the real world. The fact that Facebook company changed its name to Meta raises suspicions that the company's intentions are not modest in the material sense, just like the intentions of other technological giants that have expressed interest in its projects. Although digital technologies and virtual worlds should belong to people as much as to industry, it is expected to ask the question: how realistic will it be for users to be free from imposed centralization in the expected digital spaces?

Religious issues

One of the issues of identity formation in the metaverse is the issue of religious identity and its realization in the new reality. If we consider that the concept of religious identity refers to how individuals develop their personal sense of religious and/or spiritual identity during their lifetime (Etengoff, Rodriguez, 2020), the question arises as to how this personal sense will develop and be practiced in the metaverse. On the one hand, we have traditional

religious systems with their specific rites and rituals, as well as ethical systems. Alternatively, postmodernism holds that there are no universal religious truths or laws, but spirituality becomes synonymous with one's personal faith and ethical beliefs, including private behaviors such as prayer and personal morality. Individuals can therefore be religious but not spiritual, spiritual but not religious, both religious and spiritual, or neither (i.e., agnostic or atheist) (Etengoff, Rodriguez, 2020).

It is here that we come to the central challenge that the presented reality of the metaverse can pose to the established practice of religious rites in the physical world and assumed religious behavior in the metaverse. If we start from the assumption that traditional religions need concrete matters, the question arises as to how much of the fullness of religious life is available in the metaverse in that case. The Judeo-Christian tradition, as well as the Islamic tradition, certainly has an affirmative attitude towards matter as God's creation. Other religions also have their own rituals that incorporate real matter. The dichotomy that would arise between two diametrically opposed approaches, if we take the metaverse as an exclusively virtual world, represents perhaps the biggest challenge and raises questions that require deeper consideration. In fact, given the essentially insurmountable difference, the question legitimately arises whether, and in what way, it is even possible to overcome this dichotomy. On the other hand, the idea of practicing religion in the metaverse offers numerous opportunities that are not available in the physical world. Representatives of religious communities, participants in religious services and researchers approach to this issue in two different ways.

The first known project of practicing religion in the metaverse dates back to 2016, when a pastor from Virginia in the United States founded Virtual Reality Church (VR Church) as a spiritual community that celebrates "God's love for the world" (*VR Church*, n.d.). The appearance of the virtual church might be interpreted as a way of meeting new challenges and using new opportunities made by the technological progress (Bryson, Andres, Davies, 2020). The supporters of a church that earlier appeared on the Internet firmly claim that the virtual church is the real church, since the communities that it forms and rituals it performs are as authentic as those in the real world (Estes, 2009). Some representatives of the Christian religious communities, such as a representative of Baptists, advocate the position that their online Church must be embraced and encouraged, that it is still developing which means it is in the changing process, and that in future it could look pretty different than the church we now (Mullins, J. T. 2011).

Proponents of the idea of virtual churches present their arguments, which they believe unequivocally speak in favor of their position. One of the key ones is that the religious communities simply have to keep pace with the development of the metaverse or face grave danger. If the religious communities refuse to accept the new reality, they will be abandoned or neglected as the population of the world becomes more engaged in the virtual world and as more activities are carried out in the metaverse (Estes, 2009; Pillay 2020). Another argument is that in this way, the religious communities can significantly expand their mission and reach those people that they cannot easily reach in the real world (Estes, 2009). In the first place, this applies to those people who are bedridden, in the hospital, or housebound for health reasons. Churches in the virtual world offer the possibility of easier access to people who, for numerous reasons, are unable to attend the ceremonies, due to health conditions or spatial isolation. According to an investigation from 2016, an elderly American population feels benefits of participating in a virtual teleconference church which is the specific type of the virtual church (Russell, 2016). The possibility of their participation in the religious community is a benefit that the metaverse can bring, but also a significant improvement in the quality of their lives.

As a counter-argument, it is preferable to point to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications attitude that "There are no sacraments on the Internet" (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2002). Catholic theologians that are against a reductionist religious experience accessible through the Internet ask whether an avatar can participate in a prayer event; whether is it liturgical; and whether can an avatar be the one who receives communion, which is in a virtual Eucharist (Spadaro, 2014). At least as far as traditional Christian churches are concerned, it is precisely the moment of the participation of matter that is crucial in the essential ecclesiological understanding (Spadaro, 2014). A legitimate fear that the virtual church causes is that it could introduce serious distortions into the current understanding of the Church itself, not just some of its liturgical or sacramental practices. Cyberspace should be used for catechesis which could enrich people and lead them to true community, not for replacing the world with virtual (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2002; Radovanović, Tomić, 2020).

The experience of the pandemic has actualized the issue of using information technologies for religious purposes. Certain church services are practiced through apps like Zoom or streamed live through YouTube. However, the nature of this means of communication is quite different from what virtual

reality offers. With avatars, users can completely hide their real identities. In that case, the question of the authenticity of the community arises if the real identities of its members are masked or hidden by their avatars. It can be noticed that until today we have not had an Orthodox reaction to the idea of the phenomenon of the metaverse, nor an attempt to give Orthodox viewpoints on the mentioned issues.

Discussion

Daily use of the Internet has brought about a change in where and how people socialize, earn a living, gather and share information, educate and consume media (Radovanović, Tomić, 2020; Radovanović, Tomić, Vasojević, 2022). The world is rapidly moving towards ubiquitous connectivity that is shaping society in a new way. Technology has penetrated into every pore of society, even into the religious practice and Orthodox iconography research (Peptenatu et al., 2022; Milovanović, Tomić, 2016). In addition to numerous advantages, the expected course of development also brings new challenges and reasons for concern. Within current topics such as ethics, surveillance, terrorism, and crime, the issue of security and trust in society and civil liberties is also addressed. Solving privacy and data protection issues is a big challenge. Religion on the Internet and in metaverse became challenged during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pillay 2020). Given that stopping the development of information and communication technologies is not an expected option in the future, solving new social challenges that are a consequence of this development and that are a threat to society, is an issue for which it is necessary to find an adequate solution model.

Already in the early nineties of the last century, as part of achieving an increasingly realistic experience of the virtual world, there was a need for the integration of physical, or real-world interface devices with generating and displaying the virtual environments (Metzger, 1993). However, the increasing prevalence of virtual reality is becoming a source of personal and social risks and threats. The future overlap and integration of our digital presence with the physical world, which some researchers predict (Donath, 2014), could lead to even more expressive ethical and religious problems. Given that the emotions and experiences realized in virtual reality are real, there is a concern about the future relationship between virtual reality and the physical world for individuals. Virtual reality is an artificial environment that a person has

personally created and which, as such, can have an unpredictable and strong impact on the human psyche (Lee, Kim, Uhm, 2021; Lavoie et al., 2021).

In a virtual church, the physical elements are simulated, and the avatars of believers, not the believers themselves, participate in these virtual elements. Contrary to that, the Orthodox experience (of the Church) is the presence in liturgical gathering for the purpose of prayer along with the community of believers, and above all for the sake of participating in the Holy Eucharist (Zizjulas, 2001). Here we come to a probably crucial point and an irreconcilable difference between the two concepts. It would be a mistake to think that virtual reality could replace the real, tangible, and concrete experience of the Christian communities. The Orthodox experience of the church implies a physical, material reality in which believers participate in the Holy Eucharist. With that, we come to the conclusion that the virtual churches, no matter how tempting the idea is and no matter if we have to accept the inevitability of technological development going in that direction, cannot replace a concrete liturgical gathering. Without rejecting the possibility of further dialogue and the adoption of new possibilities that the method of communication in virtual reality will potentially bring, it is still necessary to draw a line at the very beginning.

A significant argument is that this method of communication allows for reaching the widest possible body of believers, as well as those who are not currently believers. The possibility of preaching the Gospel and catechizing in this way is certainly not negligible.

On the other hand, the question arises as to how much of the technology needed to achieve communication in virtual reality is actually available to a large number of people. The technologies needed to implement the idea of virtual reality into practice are quite expensive, and inaccessible to a large number of people. Therefore, this argument can be taken as partially correct and certainly as an idea that should be taken into consideration. It is estimated that in 2020, 26 million people owned VR headsets globally (Gilbert, 2022). This data alone tells us that the global application of new technologies is far from coming to life soon, and the economic moment is one of the main reasons (Gilbert, 2022).

The Roman Catholic Church gave its answer in the founding of MetaCatholic, a project led by Fr. Ian VanHeusen. In the words of VanHeusen: «The question is not if this technology will be coming or not, but how will the Catholic Church respond to evangelize in this new space» (VanHeusen, 2022). This quote contains the essential question and challenge. How in a creative way

and with a sufficient amount of caution, one should approach the upcoming challenges? No matter how much one likes the idea of virtual reality and its impact on everyday life, there are assertions that by the end of this decade it will be clear that metaverse has arrived (Ball, 2022). Answers to some of the questions will help to determine the boundaries for the ethical use of new technologies.

To that should be added the possibility that the metaverse deepens the gap between those who have access to modern information technology and those who do not. There is also a real threat from industrial giants who already perceive the metaverse as an opportunity to expand their dominance and increase their profits derived from digital sources. To ensure transparency and security, it is necessary to anticipate and prevent problems that could arise due to the existence of a centralized environment managed by one mega entity.

Metaverse is currently an open space for anything that users could create including the new kind of "church" and new kind of religion. While traditional religious communities that include Christian Orthodox Church hesitate, new religious communities are being formed to fulfill the religious needs of the metaverse participants and to open the big door of the future generations' space. However, a today's average Orthodox believer wouldn't feel comfortable to share a virtual church space with an avatar that has for example a fox head. But the additional question to this topic is will the future average Orthodox believer change its position under the influence of technological progress? And will the Church follow?

Conclusion

The ever-faster progress and development of the Internet and the ever-increasing speed of data transmission have also influenced changes in society as a whole. The Internet has become an integral part of everyday life. It enables connecting with friends and family, business, education, shopping and much more, and the access to it is provided via phones, tablets, laptops, watches. It is found in homes, offices, means of public transport, and even on the streets. The Internet has revolutionized modern life in many ways, and is still developing in the direction of increasing its availability and presence in various segments of everyday life. Social networks, as one of the most dominant pieces of content on the Internet, largely determine patterns of behavior and thinking. Some of the recorded consequences of their over usage are the problems

in socialization and the psychological disturbances. The abuse of freedom offered on the Internet has called into question the moral aspect of virtual reality. If we take into account all the assumed potential problems that can be caused by Internet usage and social networks as we know them today, we can make an assumption about the impact of even greater Internet availability and more massive use of virtual reality, which is the assumed future of the metaverse. Those same pitfalls could be just as prevalent, if not worse, in the wide-open metaverse, with its array of vast virtual worlds for both work and play. To conclude, the key problem with this concept is primarily the transfer of events from the realm of physical reality to the realm of metareality, i.e., virtual reality. In addition to established ethical dilemmas, this transfer, that is, the future relationship to the material world and finding a way to maintain an affirmative approach to the material world, presents challenges that are also posed to religion. Although there are no concrete indications of when or how this concept will be implemented on a global scale, virtual reality looks like an unavoidable future that will shape the patterns of future interactions. This requires serious consideration and dealing with the topic of the metaverse. The idea of the metaverse and the outlines of its appearance pose many dilemmas for social science researchers, religionists, ethicists, philosophers, as well as everyday Internet users.

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