THE NEW ESCAPE: REALITY, VIRTUALITY, AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Jonas Miklavčič

Introduction

The question of what constitutes escapism has long revealed essential aspects of a society's pressures, desires, and metaphysical anxieties. In modernity, "reality" has frequently been construed as a realm of obligation and finitude, while escape pointed toward intoxication, imagination, or transcendence—domains promising relief from the weight of the real.[1] Digital technologies have significantly altered this dynamic, creating immersive spaces that blur the boundary between reality and its alternatives.

In this context, Tom Waits' remark, "Reality is for people who can't face drugs," is especially resonant. On the surface, it functions as dark humor, reversing the usual understanding of escapism. But it also gestures toward a deeper philosophical inversion: reality itself becomes a coping mechanism for those overwhelmed by heightened or altered states of experience. The concept of "the real" becomes increasingly unstable.

Building on this paradox, we might suggest a contemporary analog: "Reality is for people who can't face virtuality." Like Waits' line, the inversion is ironic, yet it reflects a genuine shift. Virtual spaces once

[1] This article was written as part of the research program P6-0269 *Religion, Ethics, Education and Challenges of Contemporary Society*, and research project J6-60105 *Theology and Digitalisation. Anthropological and Ethical Challenges*, funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS).

https://doi.org/10.35469/poligrafi.2025.512 | Poligrafi, no. 119/120, vol. 30, 2025, pp. 175–194

represented an escape from the real; now, the "real" is increasingly perceived as an escape from the virtual. This reversal signals a significant transformation in the existential and cultural functions of both domains.

This article reflects on that transformation. Rather than offering rigid definitions of reality, virtuality, or religious experience, it seeks to trace an emerging experiential pattern—one marked by digital exhaustion, existential longing, and a surprising turn toward experiential forms that were once associated with the sacred. The approach is phenomenological and interpretive: it does not aim at causal explanation but explores how contemporary escapism is lived, structured, and rendered meaningful. In this sense, it aligns with the broader tradition of phenomenological inquiry into culture and religion.

This argument proceeds by tracing the historical reimagining of virtuality, analyzing the burdens of hyperpresence, and examining the paradox of a hypervirtualized "reality." Along this path, we argue that contemporary escapism is not merely about rest, but about the search for a qualitatively different mode of experience—one that bears structural resemblance to religious life, even if it no longer claims religious content.

From Reality to Virtuality—and Back Again

In the late twentieth century, virtuality was frequently framed as an escape from the burdens of embodied existence. Digital spaces—most notably video games—offered anonymity, identity play, and freedom from social and material consequences. For many, the virtual was not an extension of reality but an alternative to it.

Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen* cast online environments as laboratories for multiple selves, where individuals could experiment with roles and narratives beyond the rigidity of offline identity.[2] The internet thus emerged as a psychological and cultural frontier, where experimentation and self-construction supplanted the givenness of the real.

---

[2] Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

Similarly, theorists such as Jean Baudrillard provided a more critical but equally far-reaching interpretation. In his theory of hyperreality, virtual spaces can function as *simulacra*—detached from referential reality and increasingly replacing it. These simulations did not merely mask or distort the real but produced a separate reality altogether, one governed by its own internal logic of signs, symbols, and spectacles.[3] As such, virtuality came to be seen as a domain where the messiness, limitations, and pain of real life could be bypassed—an imagined horizon of fluidity, excess, and control.

Today, however, this trajectory has reversed. Virtuality is no longer primarily imagined as a refuge; instead, cultural discourse increasingly speaks of escaping from it. Phrases such as "digital detox," "offline retreats," and "disconnect to reconnect" point to a wider affective shift: where virtuality once symbolized liberation, it now evokes overstimulation, fatigue, and estrangement. This reversal raises philosophical questions. The celebrated movement from reality to virtuality has looped back, with renewed appeals for embodied, "authentic" experience. Yet this return is ambiguous and shaped by the very digital infrastructures it seeks to escape. What emerges is a deeper transformation: from virtuality as an escape from reality to reality as an escape from virtuality, signaling not just a change in preference, but a reconfiguration of experience, embodiment, and meaning itself.

Virtuality Has Become Too Real

So, what exactly are we escaping from? It would be too simplistic to claim that virtuality has become unbearable because it is somehow "less real." In fact, quite the opposite appears to be true: today's digital experience is overwhelmingly real—and it is precisely this *hyperreality* that makes it unbearable.

Virtuality today is no longer a lightweight simulation or detached realm of play. It is saturated with consequence, interwoven with our identities, and present in nearly every corner of daily life. Its

---

[3] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

psychological and existential weight stems not from its artificiality but from its relentless intensity and all-encompassing presence.

We can identify several interrelated characteristics that define this new digital condition:

Excessive responsiveness. Every digital action invites immediate reactions—likes, comments, replies, and reposts. This creates a constant loop of feedback, validation seeking, and even surveillance. The individual is never left alone; we are always on display, always potentially interrupted. This dynamic of real-time responsiveness has been linked to stress, anxiety, and depression, particularly among younger users.[4]

Constant presence. Digital life is omnipresent—on our wrists, in our pockets, on our nightstands. Notifications arrive around the clock. There is no longer a meaningful separation between "being online" and "being offline"; the digital seeps into every spatial and temporal context. As Sherry Turkle observes, the smartphone has become a "place" we go to (even a place of hope)—not just a tool we can simply put down.[5]

Perpetual performativity. Everything we do online becomes a kind of performance. Even supposedly private or intimate gestures—text messages, selfies, or birthday wishes—are rendered in anticipation of an audience. Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* finds renewed relevance here: we no longer live our lives directly, but through representations of ourselves staged for others.[6] Social media environments, by design, intensify this theatrical mode of being.

Real-world consequences. Our digital actions now have significant and lasting impacts. A tweet may cost someone their job. A photo may damage a relationship. A moment of online shame may persist for years. The distinction between "virtual" and "real" consequences

---

[4] Cecilie Schou Andreassen, Ståle Pallesen and Mark D Griffiths, "The Relationship Between Addictive Use of Social Media, Narcissism, and Self-Esteem: Findings from a Large National Survey," *Addictive Behaviors* 64 (2017): 287–293, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2016.03.006; Melissa G. Hunt, Rachel Marx, Courtney Lipson and Jordyn Young, "No More FOMO: Limiting Social Media Decreases Loneliness and Depression," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 37, no. 10 (2018): 751–768, https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2018.37.10.751.

[5] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 3.

[6] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

has collapsed. Scholars such as danah boyd have explored how digital participation increasingly involves reputational and inequality risks, addiction, and emotional toll.[7]

Permanence of digital memory. The virtual never forgets. Our digital past—tweets, photos, searches, and messages—remains constantly accessible, ready to be resurfaced, reinterpreted, or weaponized. As Viktor Mayer-Schönberger puts it, we are remembering too much and forgetting too little.[8] There is no erasure, no clean break from our past selves, which would allow us to live in a forward-looking way.

These structural features of digital life are not merely anecdotal; they are corroborated by a growing body of empirical research. A systematic review and meta-analysis by Keles, McCrae, and Grealish confirms strong correlations between social media use and elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress in adolescents.[9] Twenge and Haidt et al. further demonstrate that the sharp rise in anxiety and depressive symptoms among teenagers since 2012 aligns with increased smartphone and social media use, especially among girls.[10] According to a 2023 U.S. Surgeon General advisory, social media platforms present a profound risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents.[11] The contribution of social networks to feelings of loneliness is also often highlighted.[12]

These findings suggest that virtuality today does not alleviate the burdens of real life—it amplifies them. It offers no silence, no pause, no

---

[7] danah boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

[8] Viktor Mayer-Schönberger, *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

[9] Betul Keles, Niall McCrae and Annmarie Grealish, "A Systematic Review: The Influence of Social Media on Depression, Anxiety and Psychological Distress in Adolescents," *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 25, no. 1 (2019): 79–93, https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2019.1590851.

[10] Jean M. Twenge, Jonathan Haidt, Jimmy Lozano and Kevin M. Cummins, "Specification curve analysis shows that social media use is linked to poor mental health, especially among girls," *Acta Psychologica* 224 (2022): 103512, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2022.103512.

[11] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory* (Washington, D.C.: HHS, 2023), 6–7.

[12] David Kraner, "Osamljenost in raztresenost v mreži socialnih medijev," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 83(4) (2023): 1003–1020, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2023/04/Kraner.

safe interiority. Its very responsiveness, its permanence, and its omnipresence create a condition of continuous exposure and self-regulation. The problem with virtuality is not that it has failed to deliver a realistic experience, but because it delivers *too much* of it, *too relentlessly*, and with *too little refuge*.

We do not flee virtuality because it is artificial. We flee because it feels all too real.

The Hypervirtuality of "Reality"

Where, then, do we escape to? Ostensibly, toward "reality"—nature, silence, slowness, and embodiment. Yet this "reality" is no longer a pre-digital sphere untouched by mediation. It is curated and stylized, shaped by algorithmic trends and aesthetic expectations born of the very platforms we seek to resist. For the younger generations, reality outside of digital frames scarcely exists: there is no memory of a world unmediated by smartphones or social feeds. Even retreats to mountains or villages are pre-framed by Instagram's grammar of images and captions. What is presented as "offline" is often more hyper-mediated than the online—the "real" becoming another filter, another form of content.[13]

This is a mode of *hypervirtuality*: reality constructed in reference to screens, not as ontological otherness but as reality-as-content. Travel or leisure often confirm online templates—the forest as it appears on Pinterest, the cappuccino as styled in lifestyle reels. Thus, escape from virtuality does not lead into a separate register but into a different mode of the virtual: one more analog, aestheticized, and performatively "real." Yet this supposed authenticity quickly re-enters the circuits of mediation. The cabin retreat becomes a story; the slow morning a reel. What promised withdrawal becomes another cycle of visibility and recognition. The logic of the platform remains intact.

Our contemporary escapism, then, is not ontological but experiential. Given the deep interconnection between reality and virtuality, the

---

[13] Nathan Jurgenson, "The IRL Fetish," *The New Inquiry*, June 28, 2012, https://thenewinquiry.com/the-irl-fetish/.

issue is no longer which is "real" but what feels real: experiences that are quieter, slower, and affectively grounding—even if scaffolded by algorithms.

Escapism as a Quest for a Different Mode of Experience

Although we can never fully escape virtuality, because it dictates how we see reality in the first place, when we examine closely what people intuitively seek by escaping virtuality, we do not discover a naïve desire to return to a pre-digital world. What emerges instead is a more subtle, experiential pattern: a longing for a different *quality* of being. A mode of experience that feels less performative, less fractured, and less exposed. People are drawn not simply to "reality," but to moments and environments that offer a palpable alternative to the rhythms of digital life—experiences marked by a kind of existential resonance that has become difficult to find online, but much easier to find in nature, for example.[14]

We can identify several recurring characteristics in the kinds of experiences people seek when they try to "disconnect." These features are not unified by a specific ideology or cultural program, but they reveal a shared affective grammar—something deeply felt yet rarely named directly.

Silence

People crave moments free from notifications, pings, messages, and algorithmically curated chatter. Silence, in this sense, is not merely the absence of sound, but the absence of summons. It signals relief from being constantly addressed and expected to respond. Contemporary research confirms that exposure to constant alerts and multitasking environments is associated with increased stress, diminished cognitive

---

[14] Bojan Žalec, "Religija in narava v luči Rosove teorije resonance," *Poligrafi* 26, no. 103/104 (2021): 5–22, https://doi.org/10.35469/poligrafi.2021.298.

performance, and emotional fatigue.[15] Silence, by contrast, is increasingly experienced as a rare luxury—one associated with clarity and presence.[16]

Solitude

In digital life, solitude is structurally undermined. Even when physically alone, we remain tethered to others through our devices—our gestures, thoughts, and appearances constantly co-present with invisible audiences. Escaping virtuality often means reclaiming genuine solitude: time when one is not performing, not curating, and not anticipating feedback.[17] Solitude here is not antisocial; it is foundational for depth and reflection.

Meaning

In virtual environments, meaning often becomes fragmented—measured in clicks, metrics, and virality. Escapism signals a yearning for experiences that feel intrinsically valuable, not externally validated. Whether walking in nature, reading a physical book, or sharing unmediated conversation, people seek moments where value arises inherently from *being*, not broadcasting.[18]

Non-responsiveness

People increasingly desire environments that do *not* respond to their input. We have already mentioned that in the digital age, we always need to be available to the world. But the world must also always

---

15 Gloria Mark, *Attention Span: A Groundbreaking Way to Restore Balance, Happiness and Productivity* (Hanover Square Press, 2023).

16 Justin Zorn and Leigh Marz, *Golden: The Power of Silence in a World of Noise* (New York: Harper Wave, 2022).

17 Cal Newport, *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World* (New York: Portfolio, 2019).

18 Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2020).

respond to us immediately. The appeal of alone time, and thus certain landscapes and nature, is often in not getting feedback on everything you do.[19]

Withdrawal from Productivity

The logic of productivity permeates not only our work lives but our leisure, our self-presentation, and even our healing. The concept of the "optimized self" thrives online, where users are encouraged to track, improve, and publicize their progress. Escapism often involves a desire to *not* produce anything—to dwell in uselessness, slowness, or inefficiency without guilt. This is evident in the popularity of "doing nothing" retreats, walking without purpose, or spending time with no agenda.[20] In this sense, holidays are sometimes said to be an escape from reality.

Timelessness

The digital world is marked by micro-temporalities—refresh rates, countdowns, and algorithmic prioritizations. Many escapist experiences aim to suspend this sense of time: to enter moments that feel outside linear progression. This is often described phenomenologically as "flow" or "presence," but it may also echo something deeper—a longing to inhabit a time not governed by urgency, deadlines, or FOMO (fear of missing out).[21]

---

[19] Stephen Kaplan, "The Restorative Benefits of Nature: Toward an Integrative Framework," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 15, no. 3 (1995): 169–82, https://doi.org/10.1016/0272-4944(95)90001-2.

[20] Andrew Smart, *Autopilot: The Art and Science of Doing Nothing* (New York City: OR Books, 2013).

[21] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990).

Interior Depth

Perhaps most elusive is the craving for undivided interiority. Much of digital life is externalized. The notion of a purely internal experience, one that is not posted, documented, or liked, becomes rare. Escapist moments reclaim this hiddenness. Doing things for yourself only. Not only »performing for yourself«, but not performing at all. Just being.[22]

What we are witnessing is longing not just for disconnection, but for an entirely different *mode* of being in the world—a mode of being that is deeply resonant of a very specific experience.

Religious Traditions and the Experience

At first glance, the desires outlined in the previous section—silence, solitude, meaning, non-responsiveness, timelessness, and interiority—seem thoroughly contemporary, secular, and even practical. They may appear as nothing more than a natural psychological response to the overstimulation of digital life. And yet, when we pause and reflect, something fascinating emerges.

All of these characteristics are, in fact, fundamental elements of experience as it has been described across the centuries in religious, spiritual, and theological reflection. Without necessarily knowing it, the modern subject fleeing the hyper-responsiveness of virtual life is seeking out an experiential mode long cultivated in religious traditions. The escape from virtuality reveals not simply a desire for calm, but a latent longing for something fairly similar to what religious phenomenology has identified as sacred experience.

Silence, for example, has always occupied a central place in contemplative traditions. Thomas Merton, the 20th-century Trappist monk, discusses silence extensively in his book *New Seeds of Contemplation*, where he explores silence as a spiritual practice, the language of God, and a path to healing and communion.[23] His writings emphasize silence as essential to genuine contemplation, highlighting its role in

---

22 Turkle, *Alone Together*.

23 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 2007).

overcoming the noise and fragmentation of modern life. Merton also reflects deeply on silence in his journals and essays, such as *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer* and various poetic meditations where silence is linked to stillness, listening, and the inner life.[24]

Solitude likewise emerges not as isolation, but as the context in which deeper truths are encountered. Early Christian monastics—the so-called Desert Fathers—retreated into the wilderness not to abandon the world, but to come closer to what they saw as the ultimate reality.[25] In solitude, they found freedom from public performance and worldly attachment, allowing the self to open to the divine. Contemporary secular practices of retreat and digital detox echo these movements, even if stripped of their explicit theological framework.

Meaning—or what William James called the "noetic quality" of religious experience—is the sense that an event, moment, or presence communicates something fundamentally *true,* which is revealed and full of significance.[26] In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James identifies this quality as central to spiritual states: they convey insight that feels authoritative, even if it cannot be fully articulated. Many of the experiences that people seek today—whether watching the sunrise alone, immersing themselves in nature, or sharing unmediated conversation—bear this noetic texture. They feel meaningful in a way that resists commodification or algorithmic explanation.

Non-responsiveness, too, plays a crucial role in religious phenomenology. James again notes the feeling of *passivity* in religious episodes—where the individual does not *create* the experience, but *receives* it, experiences it, almost as a mystical state.[27] The sacred does not obey our commands. Unlike the digital realm, where every swipe or tap generates a programmed outcome, the religious domain is often non-responsive and especially not under our control.

---

[24] Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer* (San Francisco: Harper SanFrancisco, 1996).

[25] Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 55–56.

[26] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 295.

[27] *Ibid.*, 295–296.

Withdrawal from productivity finds resonance in mystical traditions where *uselessness* becomes the gateway to divine presence. Evelyn Underhill, in her classic study *Mysticism*, describes the purgative phase in which the mystic detaches from worldly obligations to enter contemplative stillness.[28] The refusal to produce becomes the very condition for receptivity.

Timelessness is likewise a core attribute of sacred experience. Mircea Eliade, in *The Sacred and the Profane*, describes the religious festival or ritual as a "break" in ordinary time (as usually understood in a historical sense)—a moment that accesses *illud tempus*, the sacred "time of origin," which is the source of meaning.[29] In such moments, linearity is suspended. Almost as a "time outside of time." This echoes contemporary longing for "presence," for moments that seem to escape the countdowns and notifications of virtual time.

Finally, interior depth—the sense of having an inner life that is not subject to public visibility—is perhaps the most endangered aspect of modern existence, and yet it is at the heart of classical mysticism. In her *Interior Castle*, St. Teresa of Ávila described the soul's journey inward as a progression through "mansions" toward union with the divine.[30] This movement is not outward, not communicative, not performative. It is intensely private, and it is precisely that privacy that renders it sacred.

The experiences being sought align with what religious traditions have preserved across the centuries. In this sense, we may be witnessing a secular rediscovery of something rather familiar. The person turning off their phone, retreating into the forest, or sitting in candlelight may not think of themselves as religious, yet their desire follows ancient paths: silence over noise, contemplation over feedback, presence over reaction.

---

[28] Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Cristian Classic Ethereal Library, 2010), 301–305, https://www.ccel.org/ccel/u/underhill/mysticism/cache/mysticism.pdf.

[29] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1957), 68–72.

[30] Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Image Books, 1961).

Escaping Virtuality as a Structurally Religious Practice

Terms and Method: Phenomenological, Not Theological

Before turning to the arguments, it is necessary to clarify what we mean by *religious*, *sacred*, and *transcendent* in the present context. These terms are not used in a theological or dogmatic sense, but phenomenologically—that is, as categories describing modes of human experience rather than propositional belief. By *religious*, following William James, we refer to experiences that carry a noetic quality—an authority of felt truth, even when non-discursive—and that involve transformation of the self's relation to reality.[31] The *sacred*, in Mircea Eliade's sense, is that which interrupts ordinary experience, creating a break in profane time and space.[32] It marks an encounter with otherness, often mediated by ritual or symbol, which reorganizes the experiential field. *Transcendence*, in a phenomenological interpretation, does not necessarily point to metaphysical realities but to experiences of excess—what Rudolf Otto named the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, simultaneously overwhelming and attractive.[33]

Taken together, these categories converge in what can be described as a *religious experience*. Following the clarification above, we can say that by religious experience, we mean a patterned ensemble of withdrawal from ordinary time and space, entry into a set-apart field marked by silence and slowness, cultivation through rules and practices, accompanied by awe or renewal, and culminating in reintegration and testimony. This is an analytical construct, not a theological verdict. If contemporary practices realize this same ensemble, then phenomenologically they can belong to the same category of experience, whether or not the participants call them "religious."

Drawing from phenomenology and ritual theory (James, Otto, Eliade, and Turner), the following criteria may be taken as diagnostic:

---

[31] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

[32] Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*.

[33] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923).

a temporal dimension set apart from ordinary time; a spatial dimension of withdrawal or consecrated boundary; ascetic or rule-governed practices; an affective–noetic core of awe, depth, or authenticity; a liminal stage often accompanied by communitas; and finally, reintegration through testimony. What follows is an attempt to show that contemporary practices of digital disconnection do not merely resemble these criteria superficially but actually instantiate them.

Six Propositions Arguing for Structural Identity

1. Sanctified Time

Digital detox practices frequently codify time in ways directly comparable to religious sanctification. The *National Day of Unplugging* is a sundown-to-sundown fast from devices, explicitly inspired by the Sabbath Manifesto.[34] Participants ritually "power down" for 24 hours to recover reflection and presence. Similarly, the practice of *Tech Shabbat* institutionalizes a weekly rhythm of disconnection, complete with domestic liturgies of preparation.[35] These are not casual pauses but calendrical consecrations, structurally analogous to the religious distinction between profane and sacred time. They realize Eliade's account of festival time, which interrupts the profane order, and James's description of religious states as authoritative re-centerings of life.

2. Set-Apart Space

Just as sacred experience has always required consecrated space, disconnection today is architected through spatial thresholds. Digital detox retreats such as *Camp Grounded* require surrendering phones at the gate and enforce rules of anonymity—ritual boundaries that transform the site into a liminal enclave.[36] Phone-free technologies such as *Yondr* pouches, or Getaway cabins with lockboxes, similarly create literal

---

[34] National Day of Unplugging, "Our Mission," accessed September 27, 2025, https://www.globaldayofunplugging.org/our-mission.

[35] Tiffany Shlain, *24/6: The Power of Unplugging One Day a Week* (New York: Gallery Books, 2019).

[36] "The Camp Grounded® Experience," *Digital Detox*, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.digitaldetox.com/experiences/camp-grounded/.

sanctuaries of disconnection. The logic is unmistakably spatial: crossing a threshold, leaving ordinary life, and entering a set-apart sphere. This mirrors Eliade's sacred/profane axis and Turner's description of the desert or the hut as liminal sanctuaries.[37]

3. Ascetic Discipline

Religious experience has never been a matter of spontaneous feeling alone; it is cultivated through disciplines and ascetic rules. Contemporary disconnection has this structure. Ten-day Vipassana retreats, for example, require strict silence, surrendering devices, and abstention from reading or writing. Secular mindfulness centers such as IMS impose schedules and ethical rules to protect the silence. These are digital fasts in the strict sense: suspensions of gratification to re-attune attention. Asceticism is not incidental here but essential; it is through this ritual deprivation that the experience acquires its transformative force. Digital fasting, in this sense, is structurally identical to traditional fasting.

4. Affective–Noetic Core

The goal of such practices is not merely relaxation but the cultivation of effects of awe, depth, and renewal—the very qualities James and Otto identified at the heart of religious experience. Empirical studies support this: "awe walks" have been shown to increase prosocial orientation.[38] Forest bathing reduces cortisol and stress,[39] and systematic reviews of digital detox interventions report enhanced attention, reflection, and connectedness.[40] Participants consistently describe their experience in

---

[37] Turner, Victor, "Liminality and Communitas," In *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969).

[38] Nicholas Weiler, "'Awe Walks' Boost Emotional Well-Being," *UCSF News* (UC San Francisco), September 21, 2020, https://www.ucsf.edu/news/2020/09/418551/awe-walks-boost-emotional-well-being.

[39] Hiroko Ochiai, Harumi Ekei, Chorong Song et al., "Physiological and Psychological Effects of a Forest Therapy Program on Middle-Aged Females," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 12, no. 12 (2015): 15222–15232, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph121214984.

[40] Theda Radtke, Theresa Apel, Konstantin Schenkel et al., "Digital Detox: An Effective Solution in the Smartphone Era? A Systematic Literature Review," *Mobile Media & Communication* 10, no. 2 (2021): 190–215, https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157921102864 7.

terms of authenticity and self-reformation. This affective–noetic core is not reducible to utility. It carries the same structure as the numinous: a felt intensity and authority that reorganizes the self.

5. Liminality and the Pilgrimage Arc

Victor Turner's model of pilgrimage—separation, liminality, communitas, and reintegration—provides a precise analogy. Detox practices follow the same arc. Participants undergo a marked separation (surrendering devices and entering retreat), pass through a liminal stage of silence and discipline, and often experience a heightened sense of community. They then return to ordinary life, narrating the transformation. The sequence is not incidental but constitutive: it is exactly what defines a pilgrimage as a structure of experience.[41] To withdraw from digital life, endure its discipline, and re-emerge with renewed orientation is to re-enact a pilgrimage in a secular form.

6. Testimony and Return

The paradox of posting about one's retreat is often criticized as hypocrisy. Yet in fact, the testimony upon return is part of the structure of religious experience itself. Pilgrims have always returned with souvenirs, stories, and ex-votos. Testimony completes the experience, integrating it into communal life. Studies of media refusal show that abstention is frequently narrated publicly to establish authenticity and identity. The popularity of #DigitalDetoxDay or reflective blog posts demonstrates that people feel compelled to witness their withdrawal. Far from undermining the practice, such testimony confirms its structural religiosity: it is the modern form of the pilgrim's report.

These practices cannot be reduced to stress relief. If they were simply about relaxation, any leisure activity would suffice. Instead, the structures correspond precisely to what phenomenology of religion has long described as sacred. What grows, therefore, is not a therapeutic pastime but a secular ritual—experiences shaped to reach beyond utility, productivity, and everyday time.

---

41 Turner, "Liminality and Communitas."

Conclusion: Toward a Secularized Sacred

The question that has guided this article is whether contemporary escapes from virtuality are merely pragmatic forms of stress management or whether they manifest something deeper. The analysis suggests that the latter is the case. Although casual strategies of self-care, these practices instantiate the very structures that the phenomenology of religion has long described as definitive of religious experience of the sacred: withdrawal into set-apart times and spaces, the adoption of ascetic rules and ritualized practices, the cultivation of awe and renewal, the passage through liminal stages, and the return to ordinary life with testimony.

To be sure, one might object that such practices cannot be equated with religion in any theological sense. Yet the claim advanced here is not that they reproduce doctrinal content but that they replicate the structure of the experience itself. What is sought when one locks away the phone for a weekend or enters a retreat of silence is not merely rest. It is a mode of experience that interrupts the utilitarian, performative, and hyper-responsive rhythms of digital life, and that offers instead depth, authenticity, and renewal. In this sense, the longing to disconnect is not reducible to wellness; it is a secularized enactment of a deeper form.

This conclusion reframes the paradox of our time. We may not be seeking "the holy itself" when we leave the digital behind, yet we are unmistakably reaching for something that bears the same architecture as religious experience. The very shape of these practices confirms that they function as modern, secularized pilgrimages. The impulse to escape virtuality is therefore best understood not as nostalgia for a pre-digital world, but as an attempt to recover, in new idioms, the experiential structures once cultivated in religious life.

The contemporary flight from virtuality thus points beyond itself. It testifies to a persistent human desire for a form of experience that transcends productivity, control, and performativity. In seeking silence, presence, and authenticity, the digital subject unwittingly re-enacts the sacred. What we find in such escapes is perhaps not theology, but an architecture of transcendence that persists even when stripped of explicit reference to the holy.

Bibliography

Andreassen, Cecilie Schou, Ståle Pallesen, and Mark D. Griffiths. "The Relationship Between Addictive Use of Social Media, Narcissism, and Self-Esteem: Findings from a Large National Survey." *Addictive Behaviors* 64 (2017): 287–293. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2016.03.006.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation.* Translated by Sheila Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

boyd, danah. *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014.

Burton-Christie, Douglas. *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper & Row, 1990.

Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1994.

Digital Detox. "The Camp Grounded® Experience." Accessed September 29, 2025. https://www.digitaldetox.com/experiences/camp-grounded/

Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Translated by Willard R. Trask. New York: Harcourt, 1957.

Hunt, Melissa G., Rachel Marx, Courtney Lipson, and Jordyn Young. "No More FOMO: Limiting Social Media Decreases Loneliness and Depression." *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 37, no. 10 (2018): 751–768. https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2018.37.10.751

James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Jurgenson, Nathan. "The IRL Fetish." *The New Inquiry*, June 28, 2012. https://thenewinquiry.com/the-irl-fetish/.

Kaplan, Stephen. "The Restorative Benefits of Nature: Toward an Integrative Framework." *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 15, no. 3 (1995): 169–82. https://doi.org/10.1016/0272-4944(95)90001-2.

Keles, Betul, Niall McCrae, and Annmarie Grealish. "A Systematic Review: The Influence of Social Media on Depression, Anxiety and Psychological Distress in Adolescents." *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 25, no. 1 (2019): 79–93. https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2019.1590851.

Kraner, David. "Osamljenost in raztresenost v mreži socialnih medijev." *Bogoslovni vestnik* 83, no. 4 (2023): 1003–1020. https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2023/04/Kraner.

Mark, Gloria. *Attention Span: A Groundbreaking Way to Restore Balance, Happiness and Productivity*. Hanover Square Press, 2023.

Mayer-Schönberger, Viktor. *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011.

Merton, Thomas. *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996.

Merton, Thomas. *New Seeds of Contemplation*. New York: New Directions, 2007.

National Day of Unplugging. "Our Mission." Accessed September 27, 2025. https://www.globaldayofunplugging.org/our-mission.

Newport, Cal. *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World*. New York: Portfolio, 2019.

Odell, Jenny. *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. Brooklyn: Melville House, 2020.

Otto, Rudolf. *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*. Translated by John W. Harvey. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923.

Radtke, Theda, Theresa Apel, Konstantin Schenkel, Jan Keller, and Eike von Lindern. "Digital Detox: An Effective Solution in the Smartphone Era? A Systematic Literature Review." *Mobile Media & Communication* 10, no. 2 (2021): 190–215. https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157921102864 7.

Shlain, Tiffany. *24/6: The Power of Unplugging One Day a Week*. New York: Gallery Books, 2019.

Smart, Andrew. *Autopilot: The Art and Science of Doing Nothing*. New York City, NY: OR Books, 2013.

Ochiai, Hiroko, Harumi Ikei, Chorong Song, Maiko Kobayashi, Takashi Miura, Takahide Kagawa, Qing Li, Shigeyoshi Kumeda, Michiko Imai, and Yoshifumi Miyazaki. "Physiological and Psychological Effects of a Forest Therapy Program on Middle-Aged Females." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 12, no. 12 (2015): 15222–15232. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph121214984.

Teresa of Ávila. *The Interior Castle*. Translated by E. Allison Peers. New York: Image Books, 1961.

Turkle, Sherry. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books, 2011.

Turner, Victor. "Liminality and Communitas." In *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969)

Twenge, Jean M., Jonathan Haidt, Jimmy Lozano, and Kevin M. Cummins. "Specification curve analysis shows that social media use is linked to poor mental health, especially among girls." *Acta Psychologica* 224 (2022): 103512. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2022.103512.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory*. Washington, D.C.: HHS, 2023.

Underhill, Evelyn. *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*. Christian Classic Ethereal Library, 2010. https://www.ccel.org/ccel/u/underhill/mysticism/cache/mysticism.pdf.

Weiler, Nicholas. "'Awe Walks' Boost Emotional Well-Being." *UCSF News* (UC San Francisco), September 21, 2020. https://www.ucsf.edu/news/2020/09/418551/awe-walks-boost-emotional-well-being.

Zorn, Justin, and Leigh Marz. *Golden: The Power of Silence in a World of Noise*. New York: Harper Wave, 2022.

Žalec, Bojan. "Religija in narava v luči Rosove teorije resonance," *Poligrafi* 26, 103/104 (2021): 5–22. https://doi.org/10.35469/poligrafi.2021.298.