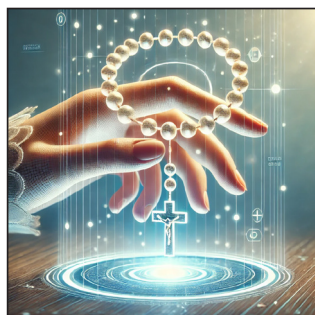

MATERIAL RELIGION AND THE DIGITAL



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P O L I G R A F I

M A T E R I A L R E L I G I O N A N D T H E D I G I T A L

Victoria Dos Santos: *Introduction*

I

Victoria Dos Santos, Eduardo Cruz: *Materiality, Religion and the Digital: A Theoretical Exploration of Material Religion in Immersive Platforms*

7

Tobias Friesen: *The Precarious Relationship Between Embodiment and Digital Religion*

33

Antje Roggenkamp: *Presenting, (Re)Constructing and Arranging Medieval Artefacts from Non-religious and Religious Contexts: Challenges in the Digital Age*

55

Aída Velasco Morla: *How Is TikTok #Interreligious? An Inductive Thematic Analysis*

77

Tijana Rupčić: *Deus Ex Machina: Exploring Theological Implications of AI in Video Game Narratives*

109

Nadja Furlan Štante: *Women's Environmental Peacebuilding –
From the Lense of Post-colonial Theological Ecofeminism*

131

Primož Krašovec, Anja Zalta: *Religijska raznolikost in problem
sistemskega rasizma v okviru globalnih migracij: študija primera
tunizijske obravnave podsaharskih temnopoltih kristjanov*

153

Abstracts / Povzetki

177

About the Authors / O avtorjih in avtoricah

189

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, computational media has significantly transformed how humans interact with all aspects of sociocultural life. These changes not only disrupt and reshape communication processes mediated by virtual platforms but also challenge our understanding of the digital universe and its intricate dynamics. It can be argued that digital media has evolved beyond being a mere tool, emerging instead as an alternate dimension of reality – one that generates unique experiences and produces its own forms of meaning. As Jacques Fontanille states, media, in general, occupy a very particular place in contemporary culture, as they interfere in all private or public practices, determining all genres of discourses.¹

In this hybrid ecosystem, new paradigms are being proposed regarding the integration of religious discourses with computer media, altering the way in which individuals relate to their own beliefs in multiple aspects. Such a premise, in fact, would give us a further reflection on how religion and spiritual pursuits are written and rewritten in relation to the social, historical and cultural context in which subjects are inscribed, as is the case of technological innovation. As computer technologies increasingly permeate sociocultural spheres, their unique characteristics distinctly shape and influence religious traditions in online spaces. In this way, digital media have created a kind of faith which is “fluid and evolving, and seeks out new resources, symbols, and experiences to bring into a kind of ‘syncretism of individual experience.’”²

When exploring religious practices taking place in online environments, digital religion emerges as that relatively new field of study focusing on that intersection of technology and spiritual pursuits which gained force with the rise of the Internet and online communities. Heidi Campbell, one of the most representative authors investigating this

¹ Jacques Fontanille, *Formas de Vida* (Lima: Universidad de Lima, 2018), 161.

² Steward Hoover, “Religion and the Media in the 21st Century,” *Tripodos* 29 (2012): 30.

area, defines it as: “that technological and cultural space that is evoked when we discuss how the religious spheres of online and offline have become increasingly mixed or integrated into our networked society.”³ Digital religion is primarily concerned with how religion in its various forms engages with, and is shaped by, digital culture and media.⁴ This phenomenon has positioned digital religion as a versatile and non-dichotomous field of research, capable of addressing religious experiences on virtual platforms, regardless of participants’ offline conditions or locations while challenging the reductive connotations that still surround the digital as something artificial.

Having said that, the understanding of digital media’s role in religious traditions has allowed the construction of new interpretations in academic research, efficient to develop a map of how the phenomena of digital religion has been changing through the years. Hojsgaard and Warburg⁵ proposed three waves of research, to evolve, offering valuable insights into how religion is constantly transforming and intertwining with other aspects of human culture. Initially, the internet was perceived as a completely separate realm, leading to numerous dystopian and utopian predictions about its potential impact on human society. It was also the time when the first religious communities started to find the virtual space as a comfortable alternative to spread their activities and beliefs. Therefore, Internet was seen as a tool to either build new possibilities of faith or destroy existing religious structures.

The second wave brought a higher level of contextualization, recognizing the digital context as an increasingly normal part of daily life and acknowledging the migration of numerous sociocultural aspects to virtual spaces. Researchers started to find that it was not only the power of technology to generate those types of religious expressions, but also people, as active users of digital media. In the third wave, scholars

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

⁴ 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.

⁵ Morten Hojsgaard and Margit Warburg, “Introduction: waves of research,” in *Religion and cyberspace*, ed. Morten Hojsgaard and Margit Warburg (London: Routledge, 2005), 1–11.

started to consider the Internet as a meaning-making resource in which users could find religious orientation and formation practices.⁶ Here, religion mediated by digital media was considered one more practice, another aspect of religion; the division between the two spaces - the online and the offline – became less relevant. Heidi Campbell and Mia Lövhheim together characterized the third wave of research as a ‘theoretical turn,’ emphasizing its focus on uncovering what is genuinely new in the diverse manifestations of religion online.⁷

Contemporaneity can be seen in the following fourth stage, where “media practices have become a seamless part of religious groups and individuals’ everyday lives. [...] The online-offline contexts are no longer described in terms of space distinction, but as a continuum of experience which all humans, even the religious, must engage.”⁸ Also, the strategies emerging from the digital context allow spiritual considerations to open the possibility of religious discourses belonging to the virtual universe and providing other ways of religious inter-connections and new expressions of practices and emerging beliefs. In words of Campbell:

This wave continues to emphasize the connections between online and offline aspects of life and practice, considering how this new era of hypermediation, where there is no distinction between mediated and non-mediated spaces, shapes our outlook and humanity. The online-offline context is no longer described in a terms of space distinction, but as a continuum of experience which all humans, even the religious, must engage.⁹

In this frame, one undeniable aspect of our current times is the growing intertwining of our online experiences with our offline reali-

⁶ Stewart Hoover and Jin Kyu Park, “Religion and Meaning in the Digital Age, Field Research on Internet/Web Religion 1,” in *Belief in Media, Cultural Perspectives on Media and Christianity*, ed. Peter Horsfield, Mary E. Hess and Adán M. Medrano (London; Routledge, 2004), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003063186>.

⁷ Mia Lövhheim and Heidi Campbell, “Considering Critical Methods and Theoretical Lenses in Digital Religion Studies,” *New Media & Society* 19, no. 1 (2017): 5–14.

⁸ Heidi A. Campbell, “The Dynamic Future of Digital Religion Studies,” *BRILL eBooks*, (2023): 316, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004549319>.

⁹ 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.

ties. Christine Hine builds on this concept by describing the internet as “embedded, embodied, and everyday.”¹⁰ ‘Embedded’, because it is “entwined in use with multiple forms of context and frames of meaning-making,”¹¹ therefore, it represents different things for different people. The internet is ‘embodied’ because virtual selves emerge and are constantly updated concerning the user’s offline condition. It is also ‘everyday’, because it acts as “a mundane, invisible infrastructure” for society.¹² Only when such infrastructure appears evident or when it fails our expectations in a certain way, we are aware of its significance.¹³ Digital religion illustrates these dynamics, as religious actors usually develop innovative and affective strategies to engage with digital environments, showing how interaction with digital technology can vary according to intentions and contexts. Users also embody their practices in virtual platforms, creating interactions that also influence their offline identities. Furthermore, digital media becomes integral to everyday religious activities, transforming traditions in ways that often go unnoticed by communities and authorities. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic introduced new ways of relating to religion while redefining what it ‘is’ and ‘means’ in ways we haven’t completely recognized.

When talking about everyday religious practices, we are irremediably entering into the sphere of materiality which is ‘the very’ core of religion.¹⁴ Religious materiality is not only about objects, images, or texts, but also about bodies and spaces mediating experiences of spiritual nature. When referring to material culture we are addressing “the way in which an object participates in making and sustaining a life-world”.¹⁵ When it comes to computer media, Evolvi argues that there

¹⁰ Christine Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

¹¹ Ibid., 33.

¹² Ibid., 46.

¹³ Tim Hutchings, “Augmented graves and virtual Bibles: digital media and material religion,” in *Materiality and the Study of Religion: The Stuff of the Sacred*, ed. Tim Hutchings and Joanne McKenzie (New York: Routledge, 2017), 86.

¹⁴ David Morgan, *The sacred gaze: religious visual culture in theory and practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

¹⁵ 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), 30.

are three reasons to approach digital religion practices: a) digital artifacts and technological devices can be addressed as material objects that can embody the religious experience; b) digital media can facilitate visual culture which can also help to materialize religion by providing a ‘sacred gaze’; and c) certain characteristics such as the platform’s aesthetics, coding and interfaces make possible to rematerialize the digital by enabling certain actions and performances. Having said that, it is essential to study the material attributes of virtual platforms where religious practices take place, the strategies users propose to interact with them, as well as the ways in which religious traditions start embracing certain media which are inherent of digital culture, such as AI or extended realities. As David Morgan assess:

The trajectory of material analysis runs from the physical properties of a medium and the production of artefacts to the classification of its function and reproduction determined by its relation to other things like it, to the dynamics of circulation whereby the object acquires value and helps to construct a people’s sense of community and shared reality.¹⁶

As the current fourth wave gravitates more around the experience of religion online, researchers should prioritize how these practices influence users’ relationships and understanding of computer technology, as well as how religion is being reshaped in broader, interdisciplinary ways. To do so, a study of religious materiality manifesting online requires the evaluation of “the different affordances of the platforms (...) [and] the actions and relations that digital practices make possible”.¹⁷ The ‘appropriation’ of computational media by users and the effect that digital technology has in religious beliefs create the perfect scenario for a religious evolution; all of them expressions of how our almost symbiotic relation with the digital technologies is transforming the human condition.

Following such complexities, this special issue aims to explore the different theoretical and practical approaches that highlight the digi-

¹⁶ Morgan, “Material Analysis and the Study of Religion,” 30.

¹⁷ 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): 14, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41682-021-00087-9>.

tal as a pivotal component of contemporary religious experiences and imaginaries. Simultaneously, it examines religion beyond mere beliefs, considering how digital media shapes and transforms religious practices, positioning these dynamics as integral to the shared conditions of modernity. Digital religion is more than streaming events or using social media for religious communication. It goes beyond a simple migration from one platform to another. Instead, it contemplates even more complex processes such as other forms of experiencing and expressing religious traditions as well as new ways of relating with the sacred and a daily spiritual life. By focusing on performances, objects and imaginaries, we are addressing religion as something more than theological debates and the digital as an environment where religious traditions can, indeed, manifest.

The questions, therefore, should no longer be directed on whether they are real or not, but on the strategies individuals, communities and authorities use for religious expression and communication, as well as for the development of spiritual practices. In these cases, technology affirms religious life, enabling or inspiring communities of believers to carry out certain activities, influencing the 'online' self, as well as its religious traditions.

Victoria Dos Santos

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, “Mediatisation 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; Mía Lövheim 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. Vásquez, "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

RG.2.1.3315.4641.

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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THE PRECARIOUS RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EMBODIMENT AND DIGITAL RELIGION

T o b i a s F r i e s e n

Introduction

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic led to a notable increase in the prevalence of religious content on the internet. In Germany, Protestant and Catholic theologians have undertaken critical examinations of this phenomenon, with a particular focus on digital rituals such as the digital celebration of the Eucharist.¹ One common objection to these forms of mediatised religion is that online interactions lack physical co-presence, which is considered indispensable for Christian rituals. This position can be based, in part, on recent research on embodiment, particularly the tradition of enactive embodiment, which argues for a sensorimotor coupling between a dynamic organism and its environment. This excludes the possibility of a static digital interaction, as might occur in a Zoom conference. The Zoom conference, in the context of the ongoing pandemic, has rapidly become a prominent example within the field of embodiment research, serving to illustrate the phenomenon of disembodiment in the digital realm. It is posited that there is no interaffective and interbody resonance between users in Zoom conferences, no possibility of eye contact and no sense of shared

¹ Cf. Frederike von Oorschot, “Digitales Abendmahl: Präsenzen und Absenzen,” in *Coronafolgenforschung*, ed. Benjamin Held et al. (Heidelberg: Universitätsbibliothek heiBOOKS, 2022), 97–122.

spatiality.² These arguments gained significant plausibility during the pandemic and the subsequent fatigue associated with the use of Zoom.³ In light of the aforementioned arguments, it can be posited that the relationship between embodiment and the digital is a precarious one, with the digital sphere representing a domain of disembodiment. This article presents an opposing argument to this thesis. It will be argued that this is an unnecessary restriction of the discourse on embodiment, which is neither necessary nor desirable. This paper posits that embodiment is inherently precarious and that the digital sphere necessitates a theory of multiple modes of embodiment rather than the creation of a dichotomy between embodiment and the digital.

To substantiate this thesis, the initial section of this article will present an initial overview of the relationship between embodiment, religion and the digital. This section will introduce the thesis of Charles Taylor, which posits that religion underwent a transformation from an embodied ritualistic practice to a rational belief system during the Enlightenment. It will also present Richard Kearney's analysis of the role of touch in the digital sphere. Subsequently, the article will undertake a critical analysis of Thomas Fuchs's work on embodiment and virtuality. Finally, Lucy Osler's work will be considered as an alternative approach proposing the creation of regional and diverse phenomenologies of the body in the digital age. Following Osler, the article will defend the thesis that embodiment is inherently precarious, which in turn will lead to some suggestions on how these ideas could be applied to the field of digital religion. It will conclude with some tentative theological reflections on the ritual of the online Eucharist.

² For a critical discussion and overview of these arguments, cf. Lucy Osler and Dan Zahavi, "Sociality and Embodiment: Online Communication During and After Covid-19," *Foundations of Science* 28 (2023): 1129–1124, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10699-022-09861-1>.

³ Jesper Aagaard, "On the dynamics of Zoom fatigue," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 28, no. 6 (2022): 1878–1891, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221099711>.

Setting the Stage: Are We Living in a Time of Exarnation?

In his magnum opus *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor posits that the Enlightenment has led to a time of exarnation and disembodiment, a state of being that we continue to wrestle with today. According to this view, Kant, Descartes, and other thinkers have put forth the idea that humans are fundamentally thinking beings. Their critique of reason also included a critique of religion, which in Kant's case, took aim at a religion within the bounds of pure reason. In this context, exarnation is thus defined as "the transfer of embodied, enfleshed forms of religious life, to those which are more 'in the head'."⁴ This process is then further described as the "Great Disembedding."⁵ This means that before the Enlightenment, religion was connected to ritual, practice, and community. However, following the Enlightenment period, religion became individualized and rationalized in modernity. As plausible as Taylor's individual theses are, this grand narrative can become voracious and obscure the view for precise phenomenological analyses. If, for example, the digital age is categorized in such a history of decline, it is only seen as a continuation of the "Great Disembedding." The question of how digital religion is to be assessed is thus already decided a priori by the discursive framing and the grand narrative. Digital religion must be disembodied, individualistic, and inferior compared to *real, embodied* rituals of discrete communities. In this light, a fair assessment of the possibilities of embodiment in digital religion can hardly be expected.

An example of such an integration of the digital age into the narrative of the secular age can be found in Richard Kearney's book *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense*. In this book, Kearney takes the notion of "exarnation" from Taylor and applies it to the digital age. More specifically, he argues that the sense of touch is being lost in a digitized world. Thus, the last chapter of his book is titled "Reclaiming Touch in the Age of Exarnation." In this chapter, he narrows Taylor's big story of exarnation from the Enlightenment to a problem of contempo-

⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge/London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 613.

⁵ Ibid., 146–158.

rary times: “Clearly, the current generation is becoming increasingly dependent on electronic devices that connect them with virtual worlds while disconnecting them from real ones. At the touch of a tab, we gain a digital universe but lose touch with ourselves. We create virtual profiles at the price of tactile experience. Omnipresent access at the cost of real presence.”⁶ In addition to the metaphysical assumption of a clear separation between *real* and *virtual* worlds, Kearney also acts as an admonisher here, citing statistics on young people’s mobile phone use and criticizing the loss of *real* corporeal contact. This criticism is articulated in the light of two highly controversial topics of contemporary culture: sexual harassment and sex work. In the context of sexual harassment, Kearney points to the *#MeToo* debate. For Kearney, a key part of this debate is due to “attitudes of suspicion and confusion making genuine erotic exchange more difficult.”⁷ This argument is rooted in the idea that there has been a “move from tactile contact to optical vision,”⁸ which in turn leads to “[t]he flight of erotic-romantic behavior, from communal rituals to digital fantasies.”⁹ He then rejects the idea that we must return to the “courtship rites of yesteryear”¹⁰ but continues by asserting “the need for novel pedagogies of bodily wisdom.”¹¹ This analysis may have a point, but it also overestimates the harmoniousness of interbody tactile contact before the digital age. One can at least claim that Kearney is very silent here about the abysmal nature of touch (harassment, violence, and unwanted touch), a fact that is particularly unsettling in the context of the sensitive *#MeToo* debate. The objective of this article is to examine the implicit discourse pattern that lies behind Kearney’s analysis, namely the pattern of harmonization versus over-problematization. The concept of harmonization implies that the domain of inter-bodily contact is perceived solely in terms of its favorable aspects, while the potential drawbacks associated with physi-

⁶ Richard Kearney, *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 117.

⁷ Ibid., 121.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

cal exposure are overlooked. On the other hand, over-problematization means an overemphasis on the disadvantages of the digital world that leads to a narrow perspective that fails to recognize the positive aspects of online contact. For instance, the loss of physical contact is often viewed as a negative consequence of digital communication, but the opportunities for remote collaboration and the enhanced accessibility of information are frequently overlooked. Regardless of one's opinion of Kearney's analysis, the following examination will provide insight into this discourse pattern of harmonization vs. over-problematization. The initial aspect to be considered is the pattern of harmonization. Kearney diagnoses a flight from the collective practices of erotic-romantic behavior without engaging with the problematic aspects of this phenomenon. As a result, he fails to acknowledge the potential risks associated with touch and unwanted contact. In this context, Kearney's analysis of the concept of "tact" is undoubtedly insightful, but he does not fully elucidate the inherent fragility, contextuality, and precariousness of this concept. The harmonization of interbody contact is accompanied by an over-problematization that pejoratively talks about the lack of "bodily wisdom" and "digital fantasies."

A second example of Kearney's implicit harmonization narrative is his analysis of sex work. In this analysis, he posits that the transition to digital platforms has resulted in a decline in interbody contact. He writes: "Moreover, it is telling that most urban sex shops and red-light districts are disappearing with the rise of the online sex industry where consumers now avail themselves of streamed simulations or direct-order products at the tap of a screen. Just as Amazon is closing bookstores, Pornhub is closing public venues of erotica."¹² It needs to be acknowledged that this quote has been taken out of context, as it forms part of a larger project by Kearney. While this project has the potential to offer a positive critique of the present, it is still surprising to find that the quote in question implicitly valorizes the real-world embodiment of sex work. Two aspects of the quote warrant further examination: first, the omission of certain elements, and second, the concealment of alternative analyses. Kearney does not address the potential dangers and vul-

¹² Ibid., 120.

nerabilities inherent in sex work conducted in the context of a direct, physical encounter between individuals. Additionally, he does not provide a detailed account of the advantages associated with the transition of sex work to the digital domain, including reduced vulnerability, empowerment, and independence. The implicit logic that emerges from Kearney's analysis of these two examples can be summarized as follows: first, there is a discursive framing with unevenly distributed problematization; second, there is the concealment of theoretical alternatives, which is driven by the grand narrative of the "Great Disembedding." This again shows that the discursive framing of harmonization vs. overproblematization makes it impossible to see the good sides of the digital. These examples illustrate the potential for hidden assumptions to influence theories of embodiment. They also highlight the limitations of some phenomenological analyses, which may appear neutral but are in fact shaped by underlying normative beliefs.

Thomas Fuchs's Critique of Virtuality

This article now turns to an examination of Thomas Fuchs's critique of virtuality, situated within the tradition of embodied cognition and phenomenology. Fuchs is a prominent voice offering a critical perspective on the digital age, raising key concerns that need to be addressed by any conceptualization of the digital that rejects a clear-cut distinction between embodiment and digital media. In his article, "The Virtual Other: Empathy in the Age of Virtuality," Fuchs focuses on the possibility of empathy in the digital age. He posits that empathy is primarily an embodied phenomenon, manifested in corporeal face-to-face encounters. This assertion bears a resemblance to Kearney's perspective. However, Fuchs's argument is not as straightforward as it may initially appear. He first delineates a broader spectrum of empathic phenomena, distinguishing between: (1) Primary, intercorporeal empathy, (2) extended empathy, (3) fictional empathy.¹³ All three are rooted in an

¹³ Thomas Fuchs, "The Virtual Other: Empathy in the Age of Virtuality," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 21, no. 5–6 (2014): 157–63, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192898197.003.0004>. This text was published again: Thomas Fuchs, *In Defense of the Human Being: Foundational*

embodied understanding of human beings. Furthermore, a positive understanding of virtuality is grounded in the uniquely human capacity for as-if consciousness. Humans can imagine, fantasize, and virtualize, a capacity that is rooted in the embodied nature of human beings. Additionally, he underscores that empathy is a complex, multi-level process, which this article will now examine in greater depth.

First, primary empathy begins at the level of intercorporeal resonance. At this level of empathy, there is no simulation of the mental state of another person; rather, one perceives a loud voice as threatening, as evidenced by the bodily tension and tendency to withdraw. The “as” in the previous sentence is therefore not a cognitive operation but an embodied and precognitive process. This level of interbody communication takes place before conscious reflection. In the field of embodiment research, this is referred to as the *direct perception theory*.¹⁴ Thus, prior to the emergence of perspective-taking, simulation and imagination, empathy manifests as a phenomenon of bodily resonance. This conceptualization of empathy challenges the prevailing theories of empathy, which posit that empathy necessitates some form of cognitive simulation. Second, “extended empathy”¹⁵ represents a more cognitive and imaginative level of empathy. It follows a standard case that can be imagined like this: I project onto the other person how I would feel in their position. Finally, “fictional empathy”¹⁶ is the capacity to empathize with figures in a novel, a character in a movie, or an avatar in an online game. Fictional empathy also demonstrates the extensive capacity of humans to empathize with non-human entities, such as robots or other inanimate things. Extended and fictional empathy are rooted in the human capacity for as-if consciousness. To illustrate, children may engage in play with a stick *as if* it were a laser sword. This form of as-if

Questions of an Embodied Anthropology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 83–103, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192898197.001.0001>. The two text versions vary slightly and, therefore, the cited version will be indicated by the publishing year.

¹⁴ Cf. Dan Zahavi, “Empathy and Direct Social Perception: A Phenomenological Proposal,” *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 2 (2011): 541–558, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-011-0070-3>, and Shaun Gallagher, “Direct Perception in the Intersubjective Context,” *Consciousness and Cognition* 17 (2008): 535–543, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2008.03.003>.

¹⁵ Fuchs, “The Virtual Other” (2014), 158.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 159.

immersion is also evident when an actor is wholly immersed in their role. Nevertheless, it is crucial for Fuchs to acknowledge that even in a state of complete immersion, a liminal as-if persists, serving as a reminder of the fictional nature of the immersion.

These considerations appear to culminate in a high valuation of fictional empathy, whereby immersion in media technologies is entirely possible and a clear-cut distinction between reality and virtuality is no longer necessary. This is also evidenced by certain sections of Fuchs's text, in which he asserts that "we are indeed bodily present in virtual spaces,"¹⁷ and that one could even posit an "incorporation of virtual space"¹⁸ into the lived embodied reality. He even goes so far as to state that: The relationship to smartphones is characterized by an "almost erotic quality,"¹⁹ evident in the "fascinated immersion in the screen and the gentle stroking of the touch screen."²⁰ This immersion is further enhanced by online gaming, which incorporates the sensorimotor and enactive agent aspects that are so important for embodiment theory.²¹ In this context, Fuchs also points to Baudrillard and his figure of the simulacrum "as a media-based, simulated hyperreality, which no longer allows the differentiation between the original and the copy, between reality and imagination."²² Fuchs points to "9/11" as an example of such a simulacrum since it "consists more in its media images than in a real event," and one could speculate that "mass media themselves create reality by making events such as "9/11" and other terrorist attacks or rampages possible, or even causing them, in a certain sense, through their public portrayal."²³ Here, Fuchs shows a sensitivity to media-theoretical considerations in which media become conditions of possibility for new realities. The ontologically clear distinction between real and virtual is thereby softened. This appears to support a very open

¹⁷ Fuchs, "The Virtual Other" (2021), 90. This quote cannot be found in the original text from 2014.

¹⁸ Ibid., 96.

¹⁹ Ibid., 95.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 96.

²² Ibid., 94.

²³ Ibid., 95.

position toward virtual reality that circumvents the dichotomy of real and virtual, as seen in Kearney.

However, Fuchs is also highly critical of virtual reality and immersive media. This critical stance contends that immersion has its limits and that the blurring of the difference between real and virtual can become problematic. Going back to the example of 9/11, Fuchs also states that “the ambivalent ontological status of a ‘media event’ seems to have contributed to the mistrust of some viewer groups, which manifested itself in conspiracy theories of a staging of the attack.”²⁴ Even though he contends that there is an ontological ambivalence at work in media events, he thus refuses to celebrate this ontological ambivalence and therefore turns the ontological ambivalence into a moral ambivalence. Returning to the phenomenology of the smartphone as an erotic device of immersion and computer games as a sensorimotor coupling of body and computer, Fuchs also states:

This would seem at first to contradict the thesis of ‘disembodiment’ formulated above. However, it is in fact the almost perfect visual, tactile, and motoric coupling between user and computer that circumvents the experiences of resistance and foreignness that are characteristic of our normal bodily encounters with the world. This manifests itself not least in concepts such as ‘internet surfing,’ ‘browsing,’ or ‘skimming’: they indicate the minimization of resistance in a medium that offers limitless possibilities for movement and, thus, an almost omnipotent self-experience.²⁵

This shows that Fuchs wrestles with the thesis of disembodiment in the virtual world and that it is not justified to say that he is missing the inherent problematic of a dualization between virtual and real. But what this quote also shows is that Fuchs’s main argument against the celebration of new embodiment relations in the context of digital media is that online communication limits the resistance and the foreignness of the body. This means that the body in real-world encounters is a hindrance for our projections. It is this characteristic that, for Fuchs, is diminished in the virtual world.

²⁴ Ibid., 95.

²⁵ Ibid., 96.

Fuchs' second argument for the limits of embodiment in the virtual world is derived from psychopathology. He makes the argument that a liminal as-if consciousness is operative during immersion in virtual worlds. Hence, he states that in fictional immersion, one is aware of the fictionality in a very weak sense. Fuchs explains this with the concepts of "iconic difference"²⁶ and the "paradox of fiction."²⁷ The iconic difference refers to the oscillation between the image in its materiality and the image as immersive. The paradox of fiction states that although one knows that a character like Anna Karenina is not real, one still feels her story *as if* it is real.²⁸ This leads to a seemingly clear-cut distinction between real and fictional. However, this ontological claim is not philosophically argued for; rather, it is exemplified by psychopathology where it can be observed that there are instances where the as-if consciousness collapses, which in turn results in psychic suffering.

The mental illness corresponding to the iconic difference is *psychosis*. In psychosis and delusion, one loses the sense of the mediating object. The oscillation stops and one becomes "incapable of differentiating between the mediating carrier object and the mediated reality."²⁹ Applied to online gaming research, addictive computer gaming can lead to the belief that computers themselves are alive. In general, delusions also tend to blur the distinction between reality and fiction, with reality appearing fictional. For instance, a person in a delusion may feel like the character in *The Truman Show*, where nothing is real and reality itself feels staged and surreal. This loss of the sense of reality is often accompanied by profound anxiety and suffering in patients. This dem-

²⁶ Ibid., 89. Referencing: Gottfried Boehm, "Zu einer Hermeneutik des Bildes," in *Die Hermeneutik und die Wissenschaften* ed. Hans-Georg Gadamer and Gottfried Boehm (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1978), 444–447.

²⁷ Fuchs, "The Virtual Other" (2021), 91. Referencing: Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (London: Blackwell, 2007).

²⁸ Thomas Fuchs' use of these concepts and his way of linking them to psychopathology will not be critically discussed here. One could disagree with Fuchs, i.e. with Jean-Luc Nancy, who points to a specific kind of awareness when dreaming that meets some of Fuchs' criteria for psychosis. One could also further differentiate Fuchs' rather simplistic account of 'normal' and 'psychotic' perception. This is beyond the scope of this article. For Jean-Luc Nancy's elaboration of awareness during dreaming, cf. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Fall of Sleep* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 7–8.

²⁹ Fuchs, "The Virtual Other" (2021), 91.

onstrates that in cases of normal media immersion, there is still a minimal sense of fictionality and that diffusion of the line between real and digital is neither necessary nor desirable.

The mental illness that corresponds to the paradox of fiction is the phenomenon of *transivism* in schizophrenia. This phenomenon is characterized by a loss of the perception between the self and other. Parnas describes a case that exemplifies this phenomenon by describing a young man who “was frequently confused in a conversation, being unable to distinguish between himself and his interlocutor,” and who, seeing himself in a mirror, “felt uncertain on which side he actually was.”³⁰ This further illustrates that typical experiences of immersion in digital media involve a sense of differentiation between the self and others. From a psychopathological perspective, Fuchs advocates an ontological distinction between appearance and being, as well as virtuality and reality. In this perspective, the replacement of direct interbody contact between individuals with digital communication becomes a cause for concern. This is because digital media work to blur the distinction between virtuality and reality. They tend to erode the iconic difference through the dissolution of the *as-if* aspect. Thus, Fuchs’s argument can be summarized as follows: empathy that is detached from intercorporeal communication tends to give free rein to the imagination. While in the physical situation, the foreignness of the other and their resistance keeps the sense of reality alive, the digital situation is characterized by the fact that I no longer encounter the other in real life and therefore need to fill the gaps left by this imaginatively. According to Fuchs, digital media tend to be transparent and minimize the resistance of the other. That this needs to be prevented was precisely the point of the psychopathological cases: one must always maintain the distinction between the medium and mediated as well as the self and other. Thus, the primary form of empathy is of particular significance in Fuchs’s thought. It serves as the foundation for the subsequent levels of empathy, and when this foundation is lost by replacing ‘real-world’ com-

³⁰ Josef Parnas, “Self and Schizophrenia: A Phenomenological Perspective,” in *The Self in Neuroscience and Psychiatry*, ed. Tilo Kircher and Anthony David (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 232, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511543708.012>.

munication with digital communication, the resulting embodiment becomes precarious, and the tendency toward illusionary consciousness is purported. This ultimately leads Fuchs to a critique of the digital, which is, in his view, apt at supporting conspiracy theories, filter bubbles, and echo chambers. In conclusion, it can be stated that Fuchs believes that online interactions lack the qualities of alterity and interbody resonance, which are essential for the richness of personal interactions. Consequently, he places greater value on offline encounters.

Lucy Osler's Phenomenology of Online Interactions

Having provided a comprehensive overview of Fuchs's position, this article will now present a comparative analysis of his perspective with that of Lucy Osler. Osler is similarly engaged in research within the domains of phenomenology and embodiment, and her theoretical approach aligns closely with that of Fuchs. Conversely, she adopts a distinct stance with respect to the potential of online embodiment. The following section will present a synthesis of Osler's arguments against Fuchs's position. This synthesis will identify four key points of critique against Fuchs and will also supplement these points with some material that goes beyond Osler's own considerations.

1) The assumption that the digital is a replacement for the real is erroneous. Rather, the digital should be conceptualized as a modification of embodiment.

One of the fundamental arguments presented by Osler against the phenomenological critique of online spaces as disembodied is that such critiques tend to view these spaces as mere replacements for traditional real-world interactions. Osler and Zahavi argue that this apprehension of replacement is, in part, prompted by transhumanist perspectives positing that "virtual worlds will be 'indistinguishable' from our non-virtual ones."³¹ This conceptualization of substitution is then subjected to a phenomenological critique, which asserts that phenomena such as

³¹ Osler and Zahavi, "Sociality and Embodiment," 1126. In this context they are citing David Chalmers, *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy* (Allen Lane, 2022), xiv.

eye contact, touch, a shared perception of space, and affective attunement are particularly challenging to replicate in online communication contexts. In other words, phenomenologists demonstrate the deficiencies of online communication. Nevertheless, this is done within the context of the substitution framework. In this context, Osler and Zahavi make the following observation: “Baked into the term ‘replacement’ is the implication that we must give something up. [...] No wonder that many are put off by the idea that technologically mediated forms of sociality might replace non-mediated ones, for it suggests that in embracing digital forms of sociality, we must do so at the expense of traditional styles of face-to-face encounter.”³² Osler and Zahavi therefore argue against the framing of replacement and in favor of a framing of multiplicity: “Instead, we should see digital communication as opening up new ways that we can engage with one another in addition to our myriad offline interactions.”³³ In advocating for multiplicity, one can then incorporate the aforementioned critiques of online communication by asserting that a particular mode of online communication diminishes a specific sense of embodiment. However, these descriptions need to be “platform-sensitive”³⁴ and should not encompass a general critique of online communication. The multiplicity thesis can also connect with the concept of the extended body. In this sense, Osler points to texting on WhatsApp as an example of expressive and immersive conversation that includes the lived body. Osler attempts to demonstrate this through a thought experiment in which one engages in conversation with a chat partner named Diego, with whom one is acquainted in real life:

The pace of Diego’s messages, the patter of his speech, his choice of words, his use of emojis and wild punctuation all form part of the field of expression I directly perceive. The style of his texting has a certain ‘vitality’ to it that is not contained in the texts but unfolds through the texting itself, giving his messages a certain expressive tone. [...] To reduce Diego’s messages to disembodied signs and symbols misses the way we experience speech (either spoken or texted) as expressive. Indeed, that we do experience Diego’s messages as

³² Osler and Zahavi, “Sociality and Embodiment,” 1136.

³³ Ibid., 1137.

³⁴ Ibid., 1129.

expressive at all should itself prompt us to understand that empathy is at play here.³⁵

Osler thus refutes the thesis that online empathy excludes the direct perception of an embodied other. Conversely, she posits that “our perceptual grasp of Diego is even less rich, as we are limited to perceiving him via text.”³⁶ However, she swiftly counters this argument with the assertion that “to empathetically perceive someone does not require that I perceive them with all my sensory capacities. Indeed, such a position would have worryingly ableist implications.”³⁷

Osler provides an additional illustration of online embodiment, namely expressive avatars. In a paper coauthored with Ekdahl, she posits that online gamers perceive other avatars as expressive: “Our analysis shows that the informants experience human-based avatariar interactions as qualitatively different from interactions with bots, that the informants see the movements of other players’ avatars as having different expressive styles, and that the informants actively use and manipulate this avatariar expressivity during performance.”³⁸ In conclusion, Ekdahl and Osler demonstrate that the phenomenology of online gaming encompasses a multitude of characteristics typically attributed to real-world embodiment, such as a rich expressive style. This challenges the assertion that such gaming is inherently limited in its expressivity.³⁹

2) The prioritization of interbody contact over online communication establishes a false duality and has problematic normative implications.

Osler and Zahavi also posit that phenomenology tends to establish offline interactions as the “gold standard”⁴⁰ of communication, thereby proposing a renewed dualization of the on- and offline realms. In relation to the second point, it is possible to concur with Osler and Za-

³⁵ Lucy Osler, “Taking Empathy Online,” *Inquiry* 67, no. 1 (2021): 19.

³⁶ Ibid., 20.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ David Ekdahl and Lucy Osler, “Expressive Avatars: Vitality in Virtual Worlds,” *Philosophy & Technology* 36, no. 24 (2023): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-023-00628-5>.

³⁹ Ibid., 19–21.

⁴⁰ Osler and Zahavi, “Sociality and Embodiment,” 1137.

havi that this dualization is contingent upon the replacement thesis and fails to acknowledge that we are typically engaged in both online and offline communication. The two are inextricably connected and mutually reinforcing. This can be linked to the thesis of deep mediatization, which posits that deep mediatization “is an advanced stage of the process in which all elements of our social world are intricately related to digital media and their underlying infrastructures.”⁴¹ Moreover, the juxtaposition of online and offline relations “fails to consider how online social encounters might, in some cases, be desirable precisely because they are differently embodied to offline ones.”⁴² One example of this is the alternative social network cited by Bail, which provides a forum for the anonymous discussion of political issues. Bail’s studies have demonstrated that, with regard to such a network, anonymity and the absence of embodiment do not result in increased aggression or decreased empathy. Instead, individuals communicate with one another in a more empathetic manner. To support this claim, Bail cites an example in which a Black woman and a white man engage in a constructive dialogue about police violence.⁴³ This is made possible by the absence of the other person’s physical form and the associated prejudices and projections. Osler and Zahavi concur with this perspective, additionally challenging the “gold standard” viewpoint and questioning the neutrality of interbody contact: “What this overlooks is that we do not all experience physically co-present embodied social encounters in the same way. There are many cases where someone may experience altered styles of embodied interaction as preferable.”⁴⁴ They then provide the example of autistic individuals who “often struggle with social attunement.”⁴⁵ Their experiences of intercorporeality therefore “may work to negatively impact a social encounter, as well as result in experiences of anxiety and social doubt.”⁴⁶ Osler and Zahavi also cite evidence

⁴¹ Andreas Hepp, *Deep Mediatization* (London/New York: Routledge, 2020), 5.

⁴² Osler and Zahavi, “Sociality and Embodiment,” 1138.

⁴³ Chris Bail, *Breaking the Social Media Prism: How to Make Our Platforms Less Polarizing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 126.

⁴⁴ Osler and Zahavi, “Sociality and Embodiment,” 1137.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

indicating that “autistic communities have flourished on various online platforms.”⁴⁷ This demonstrates that the phenomenology of intercorporeality is, in itself, normatively structured. It is therefore necessary to modify the notion of a neutral “gold standard” of interbody contact to account for the vulnerability and fragility of interbody contact. Furthermore, it needs to account for the political problem that different people experience interbody contact in different ways depending on their race, class, and gender. This demonstrates that a phenomenology of embodiment is not neutral but always political.

3) There is an inherent negativity in embodied sociality.

The focus on the normativity of the embodied encounter ultimately leads to the conclusion that the embodied encounter contains an inherent negativity. While Dreyfus, for instance, emphasizes that the vulnerability that is intrinsic to being human is lost in the online encounter, Osler and Zahavi highlight that this vulnerability is not always desirable. They ask: “Why assume that a position of vulnerability is desirable?”⁴⁸ This question is followed by some quite convincing remarks that highlight the “violence, abuse, and discrimination that many people experience in the physical co-presence of others.”⁴⁹ From this perspective, the reduction of vulnerability can be viewed as a positive outcome rather than a negative one. Therefore, it is imperative to emphasize that the concepts of embodiment and vulnerability need to be considered within a political framework. This also gives rise to a critique of an account of vulnerability that is solely based on the subject’s capacity. In this context, vulnerability is defined as the capacity to expose oneself to others and to form connections with them. The potential for injury from the other is seldom contemplated and must be addressed politically, given the unequal distribution of vulnerability within society. In this sense, one could adopt a similar approach to that proposed by Butler, who asks which lives are considered grievable

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

and which are not.⁵⁰ This could then be further specified through the application of a phenomenology of violence and a phenomenology of racism.⁵¹

4) There is alterity and vulnerability in online spaces.

In a final argument, Osler and Zahavi posit that a distinct form of vulnerability exists within the digital domain. They argue that the opposing position “overlooks the extent to which we remain emotionally vulnerable online.”⁵² The initial level of this vulnerability arises from the material interface or the algorithms of specific platforms that are beyond an individual’s control. Osler and Krueger thus claim that “while the Internet can profoundly augment and enrich our affective life and deepen our connection to others, there is also a distinctive kind of affective *precarity* built into our online endeavors as well.”⁵³ This precarity has its roots in the fact that we transfer some of our affect regulation to the online world or to certain platforms over which we have no control. The second level of vulnerability is associated with the concept of the extended body. The aforementioned example involving WhatsApp has demonstrated that technology can result in the expansion of the self into digital media. This phenomenon can also be observed in the context of wearable technology, smartphones, and online profiles. In a certain sense, these can become integrated into the self, and attacks on the digital self (such as hacking or bullying) are thus perceived as attacks on the self and can lead to reactions such as panic, anxiety, or depression. It would thus be erroneous to assert that the online realm is devoid of physicality and, consequently, of genuine vulnerability. The third and most extreme case of vulnerability would be instances of cyber rape in

⁵⁰ Cf. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

⁵¹ Cf. Michael Staudigl, “Towards a Relational Phenomenology of Violence,” in *Human Studies* 36 (2013): 43–66, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-013-9269-x>; Michael Staudigl, “Racism: On the phenomenology of embodied desocialization,” in *Continental Philosophy Review* 45 (2011): 23–39, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11007-011-9206-5>.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Joel Krueger and Lucy Osler, “Engineering Affect: Emotion Regulation, the Internet, and the Techno-Social Niche,” *Philosophical Topics* 47, no. 2 (2019), 207, <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics201947223>.

virtual environments. In this context, Radde-Antweiler draws attention to the studies of Kirwan, which suggest that “gamers who experienced such offenses and violations often show the same after-effects as victims of offline rapes.”⁵⁴ She then adds that “even if the physical body was not attacked, the social body was under attack, and the user experienced a trauma. A reduction to only the physical body and the assumed strict distinction between offline and online bodies, therefore, falls short.”⁵⁵ This illustrates the multiplicity of ways in which the body is affected by online interactions, whether directly or indirectly. Phenomenological concepts such as the notion of the lived body or concepts like the social body or extended body thus demonstrate that vulnerability extends beyond mere physicality.

Regarding the alterity of the other and its resistance to projections in embodied communication, one can cite the above-mentioned example of social media and the role of anonymity. This demonstrates that the body of the other is not only an alterity and a resistance to one’s projections but is in fact – at least sometimes – the surface for one’s projections and biases. Once more, it is necessary to challenge the notion of a “gold standard” of embodied interaction. Intercorporeality in the real world is complex and precarious, with bodies susceptible to biases, projections, and prejudices. This is further open to connections with political phenomenologies, such as the phenomenologies of racism.⁵⁶

Outlook: Precarious Embodiment and Digital Religion

What are the implications of these considerations for the study of digital religion? It can be argued that the study of digital religion needs to differentiate itself from the discourse around excarnation and disembodiment, as exemplified by the contributions of Kearney and Taylor. This is vital in order to circumvent the impediment to perceiv-

⁵⁴ Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, “Embodiment,” in *Digital Religion Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media*, 2nd edition, ed. Heid A. Campbell and Ruth Tsuria (London/New York: Routledge, 2022), 111.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Cf. Sara Ahmed, “A phenomenology of whiteness,” in *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 149–168, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700107078139>.

ing the nuances of digital religion. Moreover, digital religion research must address the criticisms put forth by Fuchs in a clear and comprehensive manner, avoiding premature dismissal. Fuchs' critique of virtuality cannot be simplistically dismissed as naive or culturally pessimistic. Instead, it encompasses a nuanced perspective on the expansion of embodiment into the digital sphere. However, it also needs to be considered how Osler and Zahavi challenge the discursive framing of replacement, disembodiment, and vulnerability. It is therefore recommended that the analysis of digital religion should aim to achieve a nuanced and platform-sensitive understanding of the alterations of embodiment in different online interactions. It is of crucial importance that the understanding of altered embodiment does not deviate from the established "gold standard" of embodiment derived from offline interactions. In examining Osler's position, it became evident that the political implications of the theses on embodiment and vulnerability must be duly considered because of their normative implications, which must be subjected to explicit discussion and analysis. In light of the evidence indicating that embodiment is a vulnerable state whether in offline or online contexts, it can be proposed that embodiment is, in fact, inherently precarious. It is therefore evident that digital religion must demonstrate its benefits in its productive relationship with certain aspects of embodiment and vulnerability. In line with Osler's argument, digital religion research could ask how online religion can offer unique benefits to individuals facing social challenges, such as social anxiety, autism, or trauma. This perspective could be further reinforced through the application of theological lenses, such as the concept of neighborly love or a theology of the cross, as exemplified in Christian theology. In this manner, digital religious rituals can be subjected to reflection in the context of normative theological considerations that can be integrated with Osler's insights. In light of these considerations, the discussion about online Eucharist can be re-examined. For some commentators, the offline materiality, sociality, and embodiment are an inherent component of the ritual's theological efficacy. Consequently, the replacement of the ritual with an online format during the global pandemic was met with considerable criticism. With Osler, it is pertinent to question whether the necessity of the notion of replacement that underlies

this argument remains valid once the COVID-19 pandemic has come to an end. Against the notion of replacement, it would be advantageous to consider the development of hybrid formats, whereby some participants engage online while others do so offline. This could be particularly beneficial for vulnerable groups who are still unable to attend church in person. Furthermore, these online rituals have the potential to facilitate connections between individuals from disparate backgrounds, thereby fostering a sense of unity and bridging the gaps that often exist within communities with geographical and social limitation. It is important to note that the objective is not to replace one Eucharist ritual (offline) with the other (online), but rather to supplement the existing ritual with the online element or to provide more individuals with the opportunity to engage with the ritual on different levels. This illustrates how Osler's considerations on online embodiment facilitate a more sophisticated theological discourse that acknowledges both the conventional embodiment of the Eucharist and the ethics of solidarity and vulnerability.

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PRESENTING, (RE)CONSTRUCTING AND ARRANGING MEDIEVAL ARTEFACTS FROM NON- RELIGIOUS AND RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS: CHALLENGES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

A n t j e R o g g e n k a m p

Today, the influence of digitalised images on individual everyday life and across various areas of society is undeniable. This is largely because digitally reproduced artefacts have become an integral part of daily life. Against this background, it is not surprising that questions about the benefits and uses of digital artefacts arise across multiple disciplines, including art education, media education and religious education, as well as sociology and economics. The digital media revolution has had a particular impact on the way we engage with works of art: initial encounters now usually take place through their digital reproductions, which are selected by internet search engines.¹

Museums are key players that (co-)shape the collective memory of a society.² Unlike other educational institutions, they primarily structure our relationship to the past through the arrangement of objects and artefacts. They ensure that religious and non-religious cultural heritage is preserved, and they present exemplary artefacts from their collections. These religious and non-religious objects or artefacts do not carry their

¹ Claire Reymond et al., "Aesthetic Evaluation of Digitally Reproduced Art Images," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11, no. 11 (2020): 2, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.615575>.

² Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (Beck Verlag, ³2006), 19.

meaning in themselves; rather, they recall and embody religious knowledge and religious practices in various ways. Scholarly enquiry into the material dimension of religion focuses primarily on the handling of objects that were used in specific ways in religious spaces.³

The emergence of digital technologies is reshaping the self-image of museums, which are becoming increasingly viewed as political or societal actors.⁴ Even though digital copies play an important role for museums – and despite foundational essays on technologically reproduced copies – there are still hardly any approaches or criteria for engaging with digital copies of artworks. Recently, cultural sociology based on practice theory has drawn attention to media practices⁵ in engaging with things and artefacts. They focus on a knowledge-based, culturally specific approach to digital artefacts⁶ and thus replace practices of individual, bourgeois contemplation that arise from religious and cultic rituals.⁷ The following considerations investigate the opportunities and challenges that arise from the digital transformation for the presentation of medieval artefacts coming from religious and non-religious contexts: To what extent does digital reproduction affect analogue forms of presentation in museums?

³ Antje Roggenkamp and Sonja Keller, "Artefakte, Objekte, Räume. Praxeologische Zugänge in Praktischer Theologie und Religionspädagogik," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 118, no. 2 (2021): 242 f, <https://www.mohrsiebeck.com/artikel/artefakte-objekte-raeume-101628zthk-2021-0012/>.

⁴ Hans Peter Hahn, "Das digitalisierte Museum – Erweiterung oder Transformation? Zur Selbstpositionierung von Museen im 21. Jahrhundert," in *Objekte im Netz. Wissenschaftliche Sammlungen im digitalen Wandel*, ed. Udo Andraschke and Sarah Wagner (Transcript, 2020), 47, <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839455715-004>.

⁵ Cf. Andreas Reckwitz, *Unscharfe Grenzen. Perspektiven der Kultursoziologie*. (Transcript, 2010), 165, <https://www.transcript-verlag.de/978-3-89942-917-6/unscharfe-grenzen/>.

⁶ Ibid., 172.

⁷ Cf. Sophia Prinz, „Einleitung: Politisierung der Ästhetik,“ in *Ästhetik und Gesellschaft. Grundlagentexte aus Soziologie und Kulturwissenschaften*, ed. Andreas Reckwitz, Sophia Prinz and Hilmar Schäfer (Suhrkamp, 2022), 108.

The relationship between original and copy

From the perspective of practice theory, it is useful to refer back to the approach of Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), who described the relationship between the original and the technologically reproduced copy in his classic essay “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” (1935/1939):⁸ The technological reproduction of artworks has an effect back on the artefact, whose *aura* changes: “what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter’s aura.”⁹

The concept of *aura* emerges from the unique existence of the artwork “in a particular place.”¹⁰ From the perspective of media practices, this initially includes *describing* the *materiality* of a work of art,¹¹ but also the changing of *ownership* relationships.¹² The original artwork, on the other hand, loses its authority when technological processes expand our *viewing*: the camera lens can depict aspects of an artwork that are not accessible to “the human eye.”¹³ However, “technological reproduction can place the copy of the original in situations which the original itself cannot attain.”¹⁴ *Comparing* a technical reproduction with an original work of art alters its authenticity: on the one hand with regard to the historical dimension of *witnessing*,¹⁵ and on the other hand with regard to the *ritual dimension of cultic integration*:¹⁶ “Nevertheless, the

⁸ In the following with reference to Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility. Third edition 1939,” in *Walter Benjamin, Selected writings, vol. 4: 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (University Press, 2003), 251–283, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9752.2007.00579.x>.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 254.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 253

¹¹ Vassilev describes this definition of materiality as contrary to the *aura* and thus as paradoxical. Cf. Kiril Vassilev, “The Aura of the Object and the Work of Art: A Critical Analysis of Walter Benjamin’s Theory in the Context of Contemporary Art and Culture,” *Arts* 59, no. 12 (2023): 5, <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts12020059>.

¹² Benjamin, “Work of Art,” 253f.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 254.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ “As we know, the earliest artworks originated in the service of rituals – first magical, then religious. And it is highly significant that the artwork’s auratic mode of existence is never entirely severed from its ritual function.” *Ibid.*

concept of authenticity still functions as a determining factor in the evaluation of art; as art becomes secularized, authenticity displaces the cult value of the work.”¹⁷ Are there any other criteria or modes that can further specify the practices of describing, seeing and comparing?

In the following, an in-depth re-reading of Benjamin’s text concentrates on the conditions and modes of engaging with artefacts and technologically reproduced copies. The conditional and modal specifications of the handling of artefacts and their technically or mechanically produced copies should result in criteria that are subsequently transferred to the handling of digital copies. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the German term *technische Reproduzierbarkeit* is translated both as “technological reproducibility” and as “mechanical reproduction.”¹⁸

The criteria proposed by Benjamin refer to different approaches. On the one hand, they refer to the original work of art – describing the aura of a work of art is already different at the level of *materiality*: A panel painting can be exhibited differently from a fresco or a wall painting.¹⁹ On the other hand, the mechanically produced copy takes centre stage: The technological reproduction changes its *authority* in so far as it actualises the perception of the artwork by addressing the viewer in his or her respective situation.²⁰ A further distinction arises in painting – while the original exhibits the painter’s *natural distance* from their work, thereby respecting the original cultic function, this distance is undermined in the technological copy: The camera reveals dimensions and perspectives that are denied to the natural gaze.²¹ The *possibility of reception* is also altered – while access to works of art exhibited in monasteries or royal courts was only possible for small groups of people,²²

¹⁷ Ibid., 272.

¹⁸ “The case of Walter Benjamin can serve, perhaps, as a reminder that the objects of knowledge are not self-announcing entities, (...). ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical reproduction’ perhaps alerts us to the interminable process of rethinking that is involved in engagements with knowledge.” Cf. Nick Peim, “Walter Benjamin in the Age of Digital Reproduction: Aura in Education: A Rereading of ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,’” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 41, no. 3 (2007): 377, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9752.2007.00579.x>.

¹⁹ Benjamin, “Work of Art,” 254.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 264.

²² In the past, access was even structured hierarchically. Cf. Ibid.

technological reproductions open up the possibility of mass collective reception.²³ Finally, Benjamin also undertakes a comparison of the original and the mechanically produced copy *in relation to religious or cultic practices* – the comparing of technological reproduction and artwork frees the latter from its “service of ritual”²⁴. On the one hand, in that the reproduction brings *secularisation* to an end,²⁵ and on the other, in that *political effect* can be attributed to the artwork: “Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: Politics”.²⁶ I understand this to mean that in the materiality of a work of art is inscribed its *memory of traditional ritual practices*: “In other words: the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art has its basis in ritual, the source of its original use value.”²⁷ Whereas its technologically reproduced copy removes it simultaneously from the *realm of tradition*: “The uniqueness of the work of art is identical to its embeddedness in the context of tradition.”²⁸ Technological reproducibility thus continues the development that begins with the transfer of an artwork into the museum.²⁹

Let us summarise briefly: The aura of an artwork is reflected in the practices of *concrete describing* it, while practices of *extended seeing* through the technologically reproduced copy change its authority. This is not without consequences for the quantitative and qualitative perception of a work of art. On the one hand, it can be presented to a wider public, it is democratised in a certain sense, but on the other hand, the original perspective is blurred. Finally, practices of *multi-perspective comparing* with the mechanical reproduced copy thematise the materiality of an artwork as an inscribed memory of traditional ritual

²³ Ibid.: “The simultaneous viewing of paintings by a large audience, as happens in the nineteenth century, is an early symptom of the crisis in painting, a crisis triggered not only by photography but, in a relatively independent way, by the artwork’s claim to the attention of the masses.”

²⁴ Ibid., 257.

²⁵ Benjamin, “Work of Art,” 256.

²⁶ Ibid., 257.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 256.

²⁹ Ibid., 272.

practice in times of secularisation and the possibility of its actualisation by museal presentation.³⁰

Presenting, (re)constructing, arranging

Taking the practices of describing, seeing and comparing as a starting point, in line with Benjamin's criteria, the project explores modes of presenting the original artwork, (re)constructing it in digital copies and arranging artwork and digital copies in museums. Two artefacts were selected as examples, the *Bayeux Tapestry* and the *Halderner Altar*. They were selected firstly because they come from the era in which Benjamin presupposes a cultic or ritual practice for all works of art, an original cult value.³¹ Secondly, both objects represent a material that is suitable for analysing the religious or non-religious materiality of a work of art.³² Lastly, the artefacts are on display in renowned museums: *La Tapisserie de Bayeux. Musée d'Art et d'Histoire Baron Gérard*³³ and the *LWL-Museum für Kunst und Kultur. Westfälisches Landesmuseum*.³⁴

In the following, I would like to transfer Benjamin's reflections on the relationship between the original work of art and its mechanical reproduction to digital copies. What functions do digital copies take on for the presentation of artefacts in museums? Insofar as the artworks are exhibited in a profane museum, it is less about the question of their secularisation and more about which concrete practices will be possible in the museum. The initial question here is whether and in what way the cultic or ritual dimensions of a religious or religion-related work of art can be exhibited in a museum.

³⁰ Peim, "Benjamin," 377.

³¹ Benjamin, "Work of Art," 269: "The epic, which originates in the early days of peoples, dies out in Europe at the end of the Renaissance. Panel painting is a creation of the Middle Ages, and nothing guarantees its uninterrupted existence."

³² Both artefacts are also available in the form of digital copies.

³³ <https://www.bayeuxmuseum.com/la-tapisserie-de-bayeux/>.

³⁴ <https://www.lwl-museum-kunst-kultur.de/>.

Presenting as a practice of describing

Over a length of more than 68 metres, the Bayeux Tapestry presents the conquest of what is now Great Britain by the Normans in 1066, including its prehistory. The Bayeux Tapestry was completed before 1087 and the individual scenes cover the last years of Edward's reign and the end of Anglo-Saxon rule. The narration of the story contains some religious elements and symbols.³⁵ The detached scenes presumably depict William's accession to the throne.³⁶ The traditional term "tapestry" is rather inaccurate for at least two reasons: on the one hand, the tapestry is made of multi-coloured woollen threads embroidered onto lengths of linen; on the other hand, the term "tapestry" actually refers to a wall hanging.³⁷ The patrons of the tapestry are attributed to the Norman upper classes, who may have used such tapestries to decorate (tower) rooms in a representative manner.³⁸ Occasionally, tapestries can also be found in the narrower ecclesiastical milieu. In this case, researchers believe that monks from St Augustine's designed the tapestry for their abbey church in Canterbury to tell their own story of the Norman invasion of England.³⁹ The first written description of the tapestry dates back to 1476 and places it in Bayeux.⁴⁰ For several centuries, the tapestry was regularly presented inside the Bayeux cathedral. The function of the regular hanging and unhangings may have been a ritual of remembrance.

Compared to the Bayeux Tapestry, the Halderner Altar⁴¹ is a genuine religious artefact. The altar is dedicated to the Passion of Jesus, including his resurrection: on the festive side, the second painted front, it shows a Calvary as well as elements of the New Testament's accounts of

³⁵ Gale R. Owen-Crocker, *The Bayeux Tapestry: Collected Papers* (Taylor & Francis, 2012), III, 1, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9781003420927>.

³⁶ Ibid., II, 1–2.

³⁷ Ibid., VIII, 106.

³⁸ Ibid., xvii.

³⁹ Elizabeth Carson Pastan, Stephen D. White and Kate Gilbert, *The Bayeux tapestry and its contexts. a reassessment* (Boydell Press, 2014), XXV, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781782043898>.

⁴⁰ Owen-Crocker, *Bayeux Tapestry*, xvii.

⁴¹ Paul Pieper, "Ludger oder Martin auf dem Halderner Altar?," *Westfalen. Hefte für Geschichte, Kunst und Kultur* 45 (1967): 124.

the Passion, including Gethsemane, imprisonment, scourging, mockery, the washing of Pilate's hands and the carrying of the cross. On the outer, everyday side, the first painted front, two lives of saints are depicted, an indication that the altar was originally created for a church with a double patronage.⁴² The term "altar" is somewhat misleading: it is a painted reredos that probably closed off an altar at the back.⁴³ The Haldern altar dates from the middle of the 15th century. Its original location is difficult to determine. The fact that it was not intended for the village church of Haldern in which it was found⁴⁴ is evident from its length, which is four and a half metres when fully extended. If it is not the village church of Haldern, in which the altar has been exposed, other buildings nearby or in the surroundings of Münster come into the focus.⁴⁵ There could have been a corresponding room in the ancient (women's) convent at Schledenhorst or Choir or chancel room in a larger town church.⁴⁶ The altar from the workshop of the unknown Schöppingen master was discovered at the end of the 19th century and kept in a Cologne museum for more than half a century before it was added to the Westphalian collection.⁴⁷ The two-winged reredos has been preserved without the typical predella.⁴⁸ In medieval times, it was probably mostly closed so that only the outside could be seen.⁴⁹ It would have been used in liturgical celebrations throughout the church year.⁵⁰

⁴² John the Baptist plays a prominent role, as does a church official. Cf. Ibid., 124f.

⁴³ Rainer Kahsnitz, "Das Hochaltarretabel in St. Jacobi zu Göttingen," in *Kunst und Frömmigkeit in Göttingen. Die Altarbilder des späten Mittelalters*, ed. Thomas Noll and Carsten-Peter Warncke (Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2012), 48f.

⁴⁴ Cf. Paul Pieper, "Als der Kunstverein den Halderner Altar erwerben wollte," *Westfalen. Hefte für Geschichte, Kunst und Kultur* 59 (1981): 128f.

⁴⁵ Cf. Paul Pieper, "Westfälische Maler der Spätgotik," *Westfalen. Hefte für Geschichte, Kunst und Kultur* 30 (1952): 82.

⁴⁶ Rensing suggests as other authors the church of Billerbeck, cf. Theodor Rensing, *Der Meister von Schöppingen* (Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1959), 16.

⁴⁷ Cf. Pieper, "Kunstverein," 128. Cf. Wolfgang Böcker, *Eine gemalte Predigt. Der Schöppinger Altar* (dialogverlag, 2020), 114 f.

⁴⁸ Karl Arndt, "Das Retabel der Göttinger Paulinerkirche, gemalt von Hans Raphon," in *Kunst und Frömmigkeit in Göttingen. Die Altarbilder des späten Mittelalters*, ed. Thomas Noll and Carsten-Peter Warncke (Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2012), 200.

⁴⁹ Kahsnitz, "Hochaltarretabel," 48 f.

⁵⁰ Perhaps it is the case, as Sadler suggests, that altarpieces played a significant role in the liturgy of the Mass in the 15th century. Cf. Donna L. Sadler, *Touching the Passion – Seeing*

Let us summarise – and in doing so, apply Benjamin’s criteria. Although the medieval originals presented today as a tapestry or altarpiece in their respective museums date from the 11th and 15th centuries, they can be characterised by a number of similarities that align with Benjamin’s criteria. Firstly, their specific *materiality* can be determined as embroidered wall hangings and as painted reredos. Both objects were produced in different workshops and are movable. Secondly, their specific *ownership* can only be described approximately. The tapestry has been exhibited in both secular and sacred buildings, while the altarpiece has been housed in churches and museums. Finally, even if their religious and cultic function cannot be precisely determined, both objects had a *liturgical function* in the late Middle Ages. The two artefacts correspond to what Benjamin describes as an original work of art surrounded by an aura. But what happens when one looks at the digital copies?

(Re)Constructing as a practice of technological vision

A digital copy is available on the website of the museum in Bayeux.⁵¹ The presentation of the long tapestry is organised by number, making it easier to interact with the digitalised object. Above the embroidery are numbers between 1 and 58, which refer to individual scenes. Latin inscriptions provide additional information about the events depicted.⁵² The colour scheme of the embroidery also plays a special role in emphasising individual characteristics: in the opening scene, black contrasts draw attention to the communication between the English king and his brother-in-law Harold Godwinson (scene 1). Horses standing directly next to each other, as well as their riders, are embroidered in different colours. While William delivers his speech, rousing the Normans in

Late Medieval Altarpieces through the Eyes of Faith (Brill, 2018), 37 f, <https://brill.com/display/title/36135>.

⁵¹ Tapisserie de Bayeux, accessed November 2, 2024, <https://www.bayeuxmuseum.com/la-tapisserie-de-bayeux/decouvrir-la-tapisserie-de-bayeux/explorer-la-tapisserie-de-bayeux-en-ligne/>. Cf. Antoine Verney et al., “Redocumentariser la Tapisserie de Bayeux: base de données documentaire et système d’informations spatialisées,” in *Tabularia*. (Sources écrites des mondes normands médiévaux, 2018), 15f, <https://doi.org/10.4000/tabularia.3278>.

⁵² Ibid.

battle (scene 50), the horses are coloured from left to right following a specific pattern: red, green, yellow, then blue-black.⁵³

The narrative of the battle unfolds with various forms of commentary.⁵⁴ Along the borders of the tapestry, different animals and mythical creatures support the development of emotions: Birds become the immediate audience of a story steeped in the glory and horror of battle.⁵⁵ The rivalry between William and Harold for the English throne is obvious, but there is also another rivalry involving Odo, the Bishop of Bayeux, and Harold, both of whom are privileged relatives outside the royal line.⁵⁶ The religious elements reveal asymmetrical power structures in the relationship between Odo and Harold and in the story: Odo, identifiable as a clergyman through his hairstyle, clothing and mace,⁵⁷ appears to be blessing the promise of marriage between William's daughter and Harold (scene 15), standing prominently at Mont Saint-Michel (scenes 16-17) and observing Harold's oath on the relics (scene 23). Further, the hand of God comments on Edward's death (scene 26), and Halley's comet on the conversation between Harold and a scout (scene 33).⁵⁸

Unlike the numbers and colours, the religious elements do not have an ordering function, but instead indicate spaces in the story that can be interpreted in different ways.

Although the database of the museum in Münster does not currently list the Haldern altar,⁵⁹ a link to the German Digital Library makes high-resolution digital copies of the altarpiece accessible (also suitable for zooming in). The painted fronts are arranged in an organisational structure and a stemma facilitates digital navigation.⁶⁰ The first painted front contains the lives of saints (John the Baptist and

⁵³ Owen-Crocker, *Bayeux Tapestry*, IX, 240f.

⁵⁴ Ibid., II, 15f.

⁵⁵ Shirley Ann Brown, "Preface", in Owen-Crocker, *Bayeux Tapestry*, xi–xii.

⁵⁶ Although Edward and William were royal cousins, Harold as Edward's brother-in-law and Odo as William's half-brother were of the same lineage. Cf. ibid., VIII, 113.

⁵⁷ Ibid., II, 13, n. 39.

⁵⁸ Ibid., III, 1.

⁵⁹ <https://www.lwl-museum-kunst-kultur.de/>

⁶⁰ Halderner Altar – Schauseite (Zweite), accessed November 2, 2024, <https://www.deutsche-digitale-bibliothek.de/item/HQHGNZ2FGFH36PHV5HYQDEFPYJ26MYFE>.

probably Liudger, the first bishop of Münster), the second the Passion and the Resurrection of Christ.⁶¹ In addition, the individual scenes on the outer and inner wings are each arranged in four squares. They are interrupted by a red border, while a similar border with plants frames the side wings and centre panel. The pictorial elements are read from left to right and from top to bottom.⁶² The order is also known as the “Westphalian scheme”⁶³. On medieval altarpieces the colours of the garments traditionally (re)identify individual persons: Judas appears in the yellow cloak of the traitor, Jesus’ cloak shows the colour of suffering and love, Mary appears in the blue cloak of the Queen (of Heaven).⁶⁴ On the Haldern altar, clothing colours are important to be able identify persons on the central Calvary, which looks like a huge “hidden object”:⁶⁵ Various scenes that are narratively linked to the crucifixion of Jesus are depicted simultaneously, but in condensed form. The dying Jesus and the thieves on the cross are surrounded by a crowd of people and armed soldiers on horseback. Due to the use of specific colours, several people close to Jesus – John, Mary, Mary Magdalene and others – can be identified beneath the cross.⁶⁶ This applies even more so on the right-hand wing, which, in an atypical way, repeatedly places female figures in relation to the Risen Jesus. The sequence of images on the second painted front of the altar adopts a (pictorial) programme that had changed in the 15th century in response to increasing devotion to the Passion. Instead of depicting the most important elements of Christ’s youth with the “scenes from the life of the mother of God” and “the scenes of the Passion of the Lord”,⁶⁷ the focus here is exclusively on the suffering, death and res-

⁶¹ Halderner Altar – Schauseite (Erste), accessed November 2, 2024, <https://www.deutsche-digitale-bibliothek.de/item/4KVAT3KFSD7MSE4ZPXIQZHB2IZTLM2LC>.

⁶² Paul Pieper, *Die deutschen, niederländischen und italienischen Tafelbilder bis um 1530* (Aschendorff, 1986), 106.

⁶³ Böcker, *Predigt*, 14 f.

⁶⁴ Rensing, *Meister von Schöppingen*, 16.

⁶⁵ Rensing, *Meister von Schöppingen*, 11 f; cf. Arndt, “Retabel,” 197.

⁶⁶ The Calvary shows the normal crucifixion depiction of Old Westphalian painting, with a large “apparatus” and mostly Jerusalem in the background. Cf. Paul Pieper, “Der Meister von Liesborn und die Liesborner Tafeln,” *Westfalen. Hefte für Geschichte, Kunst und Kultur* 44 (1966): 4–11, 10.

⁶⁷ Kahsnitz, “Hochaltarretabel,” 50.

urrection of Jesus. Non-biblical scenes also appear on the altarpieces. But what special modes of seeing does the digital copy open up?

On the Haldern altar, the *descent into (pre-)hell*, situated at the bottom right next to the Calvary, shows the gates of (pre-)hell opening. Jesus is standing on two door wings, while two demonic beings aim at him from above with a pipe, bow and arrow, and two similar creatures harass him from below. The digital copy not only reveals more details – such as these little devils – but also allows for a closer formal analysis.⁶⁸ Various lines in the scene form a triangular composition in the middle of the painted scene. The legs of the triangle are marked by Jesus' arms and the victory banner: This creates a new division of space, separating Jesus vertically from Adam and the naked people in (pre-)hell. However, a connection between Jesus and Adam is also implied, running through their right hands, which appear to be touching.⁶⁹ At the same time, Adam's other hand points behind him. It remains uncertain whether he is protecting himself from the flames or asking Jesus to look after the naked people.

Jesus' approach seems hesitant, as his left leg moves rather tentatively and he does not look directly at Adam. His posture reveals a specific wavering or, at least, does not indicate a determined certainty of victory. Does he seem to be affected by the expectations of the inhabitants of (pre-)hell? Is he questioning the necessity of the path laid out for him in the creed?⁷⁰ The certainty that Jesus descends into hell in order to save those banished to (pre-)hell is, at the very least, brought into question.

A similar finding can be made regarding the digital copy of a further scene: In the last picture on the right-hand inner wing, lines marked by the fence and lawn, but above all diagonals intersecting in the spade and flagpole, open up a special space. The figures set opposing accents in terms of body language, but also gestures and facial expressions. In the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene turns to the Risen Christ twice.

⁶⁸ Cf. Antje Roggenkamp, "Religionsbezogene 'Kunstbilder' als Artefakte. Zur praxeologischen Erweiterung von Religionspädagogik," in *Die materielle Kultur der Religion. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven auf Objekte religiöser Bildung und Praxis*, ed. Sonja Keller and Antje Roggenkamp (Transcript, 2023), 19f, <https://www.transcript-open.de/doi/10.14361/9783839463123-002>.

⁶⁹ Pieper, *Tafelbilder*, 106, 115.

⁷⁰ Böcker, *Predigt*, 93 f.

At first, she thinks he is the gardener and believes that he has taken Jesus' body away. Only after he addresses her by name does she recognise him and wants to touch him. In response, the Risen One says, "Do not touch me" (John 20:14–17). In the painted scene, one can see a double effect: While the Risen Christ – although more vulnerable in his nakedness – remains gracefully superior due to his posture, Mary Magdalene shows a kind of double physical presence, tender feelings and astonishment.⁷¹ The meaning of *Noli me tangere* emerges in its full sense: Mary Magdalene appears to show with her posture that the body of the Risen Christ has changed not only physically.⁷²

The formal analysis of the digital copy can identify spaces or postures in which several interpretations correspond to the religious. The religious characteristics of the painted scenes only emerge in the digital copy.

Let us apply Benjamin's criteria for mechanically produced copies and transform them into criteria for digital copies: Firstly, the numbers affixed above the embroideries of the Bayeux Tapestry and the Westphalian scheme enable individual scenes to be found quickly in the digital copies. They make it easier to assign the individual scenes to the major narratives of the artefacts and thus emphasise their *authenticity*. On the other hand, the digital copies allow a closer look due to a certain spatial distance from the original and the limited time spent in front of it:⁷³ By showing plants, animals or demonic beings, they reveal interesting details compared to conventional lore and traditional depictions. The digital copies do not so much undermine the *natural distance* to the original (Benjamin)⁷⁴ as they *vary* it. Thirdly, formal analyses of individual scenes point to interpretations that deviate from traditional forms. Religious perspectives appear differently: While the

⁷¹ Rensing, *Meister von Schöppingen*, 12.

⁷² Ingeborg Eugenia Doetsch, "Die Metamorphose des Löwenzahns im Lichte der Auferstehung. Seine Symbolik in der mittelalterlichen Kunst, insbesondere der westfälischen Tafelmalerie des 15. Jahrhunderts," *Westfalen. Hefte für Geschichte, Kunst und Kultur* 73 (1997): 52.

⁷³ This applies insofar as Benjamin's criteria are transformed: "Since the historical testimony is founded on the physical duration, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction, in which the physical duration plays no part." Benjamin, "Work of Art," 254.

⁷⁴ "The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, whereas the cinematographer penetrates deeply into its tissue." Benjamin, "Work of Art," 264.

Bayeux Tapestry opens up spaces for religious interpretations of history through its view of the relationship between hostile ethnic groups and specific clerical rivalries, the individual scenes on the Haldern reredos offer a variety of religious perspectives: not only in dealing with biblical and non-biblical traditions, but also by varying possible interpretations. In this respect, they do not reduce the authority of the original artefact (Benjamin), but seem to increase *religious authority* by creating space for a variety of interpretations. Do the digital copies also prove to be productive for engaging with religious materiality?

Arranging as a practice of comparative seeing

Walking along the tapestry opens up a physical experience: together with many other people, one walks around it in a darkened room, listening to the sounds of courtly fanfares and the audio guide, which describes and comments on epic narratives. Since 1983, the tapestry has been housed in a gallery of the former Great Seminary in Bayeux.⁷⁵ A glass safety screen protects the tapestry. It hangs on a rail and curves outwards in the shape of a parabola. Unlike in Bayeux Cathedral, the tapestry currently curves outwards instead of inwards.⁷⁶ Although the tapestry was probably created with a specific building in mind, it was probably never intended to hang in just one place.⁷⁷ In the centuries between its production and its localisation in Bayeux, it may have been displayed in different buildings in different countries to varying effect.⁷⁸ From the fifteenth century onwards, the tapestry was regularly hung in the nave of the cathedral, in the meantime stored on a roll.⁷⁹ Suitable forms of presentation have long been the subject of open-ended discus-

⁷⁵ In 2007, the tapestry was added to the UNESCO “Memory of the World” register. Cf. Verney et al., “Redocumentariser,” 2.

⁷⁶ Owen-Crocker, *Bayeux Tapestry*, 129.

⁷⁷ Architectural historians have considered a Norman keep with a corner staircase. Ibid., VIII 122.

⁷⁸ This is certainly in line with Benjamin’s criteria: “In the churches and monasteries of the Middle Ages, and at the princely courts up to about the end of the eighteenth century, the collective reception of paintings took place not simultaneously but in a manifoldly graduated and hierarchically mediated way.” Benjamin, “Work of Art,” 264.

⁷⁹ Ibid., VIII 123.

sions.⁸⁰ Setting the relationship between digital copies and the original artwork can draw attention to different aspects that do not fit directly into Benjamin's criteria,⁸¹ but modify them in changing the cultic and remembering dimension: What logistical considerations and physical practices were necessary to hang and remove the tapestry in a square tower or in the Bayeux nave? Were these routines or did these practices have to be (re)practised? What religious elements does the tapestry contain and what significance do they have? What is the relationship between national and universal cultural heritage?

In 2014, the Haldern altar found its permanent place in the new building of the LWL-Museum. In the centre of a large rectangular room, the arrangement of the painted fronts almost reproduces the original state of the medieval altarpiece. However, the slanted position of the wings makes it difficult to have a look on the first painted front. In their current position, the wings cannot be closed. This has two consequences: Firstly, the lives of saints cannot be compared with each other in analogue space. Secondly, the second painted front can be viewed almost all year round.⁸² By fixing the wings at an obtuse angle, the original transformation can no longer be depicted in the analogue room:⁸³ the effects of the opening and closing are omitted. In its current setting, the Haldern altar is displayed between various panel paintings dating from the 14th or 15th centuries, presenting different variations of the religious motifs from the Haldern reredos. In particular, the second side is related to artefacts that have been preserved as fragments. The focus is centred on aspects of suffering, death and resurrection: Carrying of the Cross made from Baumberg sandstone, the Elevation of Henry II next to a Calvary on another panel.⁸⁴ They invite us to en-

⁸⁰ Verney et al., "Redocumentariser", 4f. |.

⁸¹ Benjamin, "Work of Art," 272: "In the viewer's imagination, the uniqueness of the phenomena holding sway in the cult image is more and more displaced by the empirical uniqueness of the artist or of his creative achievement."

⁸² Cf. Arndt, "Retabel," 193, 214.

⁸³ Cf. Heike Schlie, "Die Ordnung der Bilder. Positionierungen im Hochaltarretabel der Göttinger Barfüßerkirche," in *Niederdeutsche Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte. Das Göttinger Barfüßerretabel von 1424*, ed. Cornelia Aman and Babette Hartwig (Michael Imhof, 2015), 185.

⁸⁴ To the master of the Barbara legend cf. Petra Marx, "Heinrichstafel, um 1494," in *Einblicke – Ausblicke. Spitzenwerke im neuen LWL-Museum für Kunst und Kultur in Münster*, ed.

gage in practices of comparison, insofar as they open up the suffering of Jesus in terms of stylistic and, in some cases, material aspects.

While the analogue presentation draws attention to different stylistic paintings and other materials, accessing the digital copies illustrates the different interplay between the first and second painted front. The juxtaposition, which can be accessed digitally, gives an idea of how differently the artefact can be perceived with the wings open and closed. However, linking the digital copies with the artefact in front of it can illustrate the original arrangements and the efforts involved in opening and closing the wings become comprehensible on the original. A comparison of the original and the digital version allows further questions to be asked: How does the perception change when the sashes are open or closed? What effects do the different perspectives have on the altar? What religious practices does the altar offer to reconstruct or deconstruct in its current context?

Let us summarise and ask for the transformation of criteria at the same time: Although the modified relationship to tradition becomes visible, must the question of religious-cultic authenticity (Benjamin) remain open? Firstly, it is obvious that no religious-cult practices⁸⁵ can be exhibited in a museum. However, digital copies allow us to study practices of *liturgical changing*. Secondly, while the analogue presentation of artefacts only provides a view of a specific perspective – the Bayeux Tapestry is mounted in an oval display case at roughly eye level, the panels of the Haldern altar are anchored on a plinth – the digital copy allows the *original practices* to be imagined or even demonstrated. The original object encourages the viewer to stretch or bend their neck, depending on their height. Finally, digital copies draw attention to the particular content of religion. The adaptation of heroic tales, Christian legends and biblical motifs demonstrates the creativity of medieval artists in dealing with their own traditions. Therefore, perhaps and in

Hermann Arnhold (Wienand Verlag, 2014), 88-89.

⁸⁵ Cf. Sadler, *Touching*, 47: "And this (...) leads us back to the altarpiece, for the image that was sanctified by its presence on the altar was endowed with both cultic and devotional powers: the altarpiece guided the faithful to a state of mind conducive to prayer; facilitated communication with the saints; served as a mnemonic device for meditation, and could even assist a mystic in achieving ecstatic communion with the divine."

contrast to Benjamin's ideas, we can find answers to some existential questions: What kind of being do we expect after death? Is there a specific encounter we are waiting for? And what do these changes have to do with the traditional faith representations?

In this respect, digital copies not only serve to convey the effects of original religious materiality, but also inspire modern interpretations of religious traditions. By keeping alive the question of the being and passing of human beings or the meaning of life, they become productive of religion. The specific answers they provide can raise further and other key questions.

Practice-orientated enhancements: Digital and analogue approaches

The approach derived from a practice-theoretical re-reading of Benjamin draws attention to the fact that the religious significance of the original artefacts can at best be approximated, not defined concretely. The application of practices such as concrete description, extended vision and multi-perspective comparison to concrete artworks and digital copies suggests an intertwining of analogue and digital perspectives. Digital copies, in particular, make original orders visible through a different, technological way of seeing. Meanwhile, the originals make physical and logistical processes comprehensible that are often hidden due to presentation constraints in museums. Together, these perspectives clarify how repositioning these artefacts was once a time-intensive task.

Additionally, the digital copies provide access to the religious materiality of the originals by means of colouring and colour contrasts, thus making interpretations visible that change conventional religious motifs. Finally, digital copies contribute to keeping questions of authenticity and authority of the original open in the reconstruction. In this respect, digital artefacts not only work towards a reconstruction of original practices, but also towards a change in current forms of presentation. Compared to the effects of mechanical reproduction, this devel-

opment does not lead to a kind of negative theology (Benjamin).⁸⁶ The materiality of an artefact that was previously used for religious purposes can itself become productive of religion.

As Mieke Bal points out, presentations and specific exhibition arrangements can lead to distortions, resulting in super- and subordination.⁸⁷ This is particularly true when the form of presentation of objects and artefacts leads to a mono-perspective comparison. By supplementing or modifying the use of digital artefacts, mobile applications⁸⁸ could offer further perspectives. By commenting on controversial findings and making comparable artefacts available, mobile applications open up further opportunities for participation. The question of the limits of technological reproduction shifts to the opportunities that digital data offers for engaging with original artefacts. Expanding these practices to encourage participation would also be a considerable enhancement for analogue museums.

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⁸⁶ Benjamin, "Work of Art," 256: "This in turn gave rise to a negative theology, in the form of an idea of 'pure' art, which rejects not only any social function but any definition in terms of a representational content."

⁸⁷ Mieke Bal, "The discourse of the museum", in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, ed. Bruce W. Ferguson, Reesa Greenberg and Sandy Nairne (Routledge, 1996), 201f.

⁸⁸ Lena Wulf, "Von der Vitrine in die Hand : Smartphone-Apps in der Museumsvermittlung," *Hamburger Journal für Kulturanthropologie* 5 (2016): 15f, <https://journals.sub.uni-hamburg.de/hjk/article/view/1037/951>.

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HOW IS TIKTOK #INTERRELIGIOUS? AN INDUCTIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Aída Velasco Morla

Introduction

Social media platforms offer a creative and visual space to showcase diverse religious content or confront negative stereotypes associated with various faith communities. Although academic literature generally highlights that social media often functions primarily as spaces for self-representation and seeking content aligned with personal identity, it is especially relevant to explore all opportunities in a current context where religious discrimination persists, and the management of religious diversity remains a necessary and urgent topic.

The TikTok platform reflects users' interest in religion through popular hashtags such as #Christian, which accumulates approximately 62.6 billion views, and #Islam, with 207.5 billion. Collectively, hashtags like #Hinduism, #Judaism, #Buddhism, and #Sikhism make religion a topic of significant engagement on this platform. TikTok's algorithm is designed to show users content similar to what they have already shown interest in; that is, it makes recommendations based on what has been viewed or followed previously – such as hashtags. Following this logic, this would mean that if a user frequently interacts with content from a specific religion, the algorithm is likely to show more content related to that same religion. Consequently, the algorithm's design itself could be limiting exposure to religious diversity.

So, does this platform truly have the ability to go beyond the mere self-reinforcement of ideas and beliefs? In response to this limitation, this paper proposes the study of hashtags such as #interreligious and #interfaith, which accumulate 269.5 million views and which, I argue, can function as bridges that signal to the algorithm: “diversify.”

Religion is present on TikTok and *materializes* through the visualization of rituals, practices, conversations, *sacred objects* and personal online reflections on faith. Users share their beliefs and transform them into visible, accessible, and shareable content in a global digital environment. Creating TikToks on religious topics allows faith to take shape in an audiovisual sense, where not only images and sounds are shown but also the emotions, intentionality, and narrative that each creator infuses. This type of content turns abstract beliefs and values into tangible and experiential elements, reflecting in a relatively new and accessible way the user can relate with *the Sacred*. Thus, it could be said that each video becomes a “piece” of religious material culture, similar to the physical objects that traditionally accompany faith practices.

The initial aim of this paper is to contribute to the discussion on whether TikTok can genuinely foster interreligious understanding. I start from the hypothesis that on this platform, users can not only materialize their beliefs by reaffirming them but also open themselves to new perspectives, thereby promoting respect and understanding among different religious groups. To address this issue, the hashtags #interreligious and #interfaith were selected to analyze how creators from different contexts use these “bridge” hashtags. The central question of this study is: what type of content is found under these labels? Although we know that TikTok has the (technical) potential to connect people and foster dialogue, does it have real potential for interreligious encounter?

State of the Art

Social media platforms are spaces where people can construct and display their identity while connecting with others who share their values or beliefs. It has been theorized that these platforms function as stages where individuals present versions of themselves, reinforcing or

challenging social stereotypes.¹ Social media allows users to select and decide how they showcase their image, ideas, and beliefs, facilitating self-representation. In this context, religious identity is an aspect I consider fundamental, especially for those seeking to strengthen their connection with a faith community.

TikTok currently has 1.582 billion users,² who spend an average of 39 minutes per day on the app.³ Although its popularity spans various age groups, 68.8% of users – approximately 727.8 million people – fall between the ages of 18 and 34. Among them, the 18-to-24 age group is the largest, comprising 39.8% of the total user base.⁴ The creative autonomy and virality of TikTok, along with the use of hashtags, foster a global community where users participate in trends and feel part of a shared culture.⁵ Its success is also explained by its algorithm, which personalizes content based on each user's behavior and interactions.⁶

On TikTok, users can give visibility to their cultures, identities, and the objects that symbolize their religions.⁷ Through the creation of narratives that imitate and reinterpret, they find a way to express themselves creatively and strengthen their connection with their digital community.⁸ In this context, religious content on TikTok is predominantly directed at and created by young users, who find in the platform a space to express their faith, influence building their identity,⁹ create

¹ Erin E. Hollenbaugh, "Self-Presentation in Social Media: Review and Research Opportunities," *Review of Communication Research* 9 (2021): 80–98.

² Statista, "Most popular social networks worldwide."

³ Datareportal, "Global Digital Insights."

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Fannin, "The Strategy Behind TikTok's Global Rise."

⁶ Zhengwei, "Analysis on the 'Douyin (TikTok) Mania Phenomenon.'"

⁷ Crystal Abidin, "Mapping Internet Celebrity on TikTok: Exploring Attention Economies and Visibility Labours," *Cultural Science Journal* 12, no. 1 (2021): 77–103, <https://doi.org/10.5334/csci.140>; Chris Miller, "How Modern Witches Enchant TikTok: Intersections of Digital, Consumer, and Material Culture(s) on #WitchTok," *Religions* 13, no. 2 (2022): 118. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020118>.

⁸ Hongying Zhao and Christian Wagner, "How TikTok leads users to flow experience: Investigating the effects of technology affordances with user experience level and video length as moderators," *Internet Research* 33, no. 2 (2022): 841, <https://doi.org/10.1108/INTR-08-2021-0595>.

⁹ Margaret Hamm, and Kate Hoeting, "#ChristianCheck: TikTok and the Construction of Generation Z Faith," *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 12, no. 1 (2023): 5–29.

community, share religious material objects,¹⁰ and even challenge stereotypes associated with their religious group.¹¹ However, there are few academic studies on the relationship between religion and TikTok, and even fewer focused on interreligiousity.

On TikTok, this personal self-representation adopts an audiovisual format that allows for quick and accessible exposure of beliefs, values, and experiences. Through videos, users create identity narratives that could reinforce their belonging to a group (such as a religious community) or present aspects of their own faith that may be interesting to a broader audience, whether believers or not. This format invites individual expression but also interaction, allowing other users to comment, share, or respond with their own experiences.

According to Morgan,¹² religion, traditionally understood as a system of beliefs, can also be seen as a series of material practices that shape and sustain the social and spiritual life of its followers. Morgan defines the material culture of lived religion as the set of physical and tangible aspects of religion, including bodies, objects, places, and artifacts, which have symbolic value and connect the individual with the sacred through bodily experience. In this context, religious experience is lived through a “triangulation” between the individual, the group and the Sacred, where religious practices are shared and interpreted.

I argue here that these experiences, manifested in social interactions and material practices, can be transferred to the digital realm, but this raises questions about how Morgan’s triangulation (individual-group-Sacred) is configured in a global public space like TikTok. Some religious – and interreligious – practices were previously limited to specific local contexts, but now they become visible on a global scale. On TikTok, users show how they integrate their religious beliefs into daily

¹⁰ Miller, “How Modern Witches Enchant TikTok.”

¹¹ Sabina Civilá, Mónica Bonilla-del-Río, and Ignacio Aguaded, “Social Media and Otherness: The Case of #Islamterrorism on TikTok,” *Politics and Governance* 11, no. 2 (2023): 114–126, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v11i2.6299>.

¹² 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*, vol. 41 (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>.

life, allowing others to observe and learn from these practices, which suggests potential for peaceful interreligious mediation and encounter.

In this work, interreligiosity is broadly understood as the process through which different religious traditions come into contact, interact, intertwine, or simply coexist, with varying degrees of depth. This concept encompasses both the individual's connection with the sacred in their own religious tradition and the coexistence and interaction with the sacred of other traditions. This study examines the content described as interreligious on TikTok through the hashtags #interreligious and #interfaith, exploring how users present their vision of interreligiosity by using them. To do this, an inductive thematic analysis is used, allowing findings to emerge directly from the data. This exploratory approach seeks to understand the phenomenon in general and lay preliminary foundations for future research.

Method

1. Thematic Analysis

This study uses the six-step thematic analysis method developed by psychologists Braun and Clarke.¹³ An inductive or “data-driven” approach was adopted to produce codes that specifically reflected the content derived from the data rather than any prior theory or conceptual framework.¹⁴ This approach was chosen for two reasons. Firstly, it allows for a richer description of the dataset as a whole instead of focusing on a particular aspect through a specific theoretical lens.¹⁵ Additionally, it has the advantage that the data are not coded to fit into a predefined coding framework guided by prior theory but are “open-coded,” better representing the meaning expressed by the creators.¹⁶

¹³ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2006): 77–101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qpo630a>.

¹⁴ David Byrne, “A Worked Example of Braun and Clarke’s Approach to Reflexive Thematic Analysis,” *Quality & Quantity* 56 (2022): 1393, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-021-01182-y>.

¹⁵ Braun and Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology.”

¹⁶ Byrne, “A Worked Example of Braun and Clarke’s Approach to Reflexive Thematic Analysis,” 1393.

Inductive coding allows themes to emerge directly from the data without imposing a pre-existing theoretical framework, which is consistent with the lack of prior research in this area and with the goal of reflecting the experiences and meanings of the phenomenon as expressed by the users of this social network. The thematic analysis, adapted to TikTok's characteristics was multimodal, including audio, visual, textual and interactive elements, as well as how these modes combine to provide a more comprehensive view of the content.¹⁷

The overarching question that guided the analysis process was: What themes emerge, and how are they represented in TikTok posts tagged with #interreligious and #interfaith, and what do these representations reveal about interfaith experiences in online and offline contexts? Additionally, the analysis steps were guided by other specific questions,¹⁸ such as: What type of content do users share using these tags, and what is the frequency? Are there any patterns in the way creators post content under these tags?

These specific hashtags were selected to guide the analysis toward emerging themes on TikTok defined by these tags, allowing for a clear focus on the study's topic. Including both online and offline contexts in the research question acknowledges the interconnectedness between users' digital and "real" lives.¹⁹ The specific selection of TikTok is explained by the importance of this platform and its wide reach (see above), which is relevant for understanding how TikTok's unique dynamics may influence interfaith representations and perceptions both online and offline.

¹⁷ Bella Dicks, "Multimodal Analysis," in *Sage Research Methods Foundations*, edited by Paul Atkinson, Sara Delamont, Alexandru Cernat, Joseph W. Sakshaug, and Richard A. Williams (London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526421036831970>; Civila et al., "Social Media and Otherness: The Case of #Islamterrorism on TikTok," 114–115.

¹⁸ Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology."

¹⁹ Heidi A. Campbell, "Religion and the Internet: A Microcosm for Studying Internet Trends and Implications," *New Media & Society* 15, no. 5 (2013): 680–694, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812462848>.

2. Procedure

Using a new TikTok profile to eliminate potential algorithmic influences, the app's search engine was employed with the maximum time filter set to "last 6 months" and sorted by "relevance". The TikTok app was used on a mobile device specifically prepared to avoid data contamination. The device was formatted, with no prior usage history, and location services, contacts, and synchronization with other accounts were disabled to minimize the influence of prior data and maintain the integrity of the data collected in the research. In the study of hashtags on TikTok, it is important to note that users manipulate hashtags to bypass restrictions or increase views on their profile.²⁰ All posts tagged with #interfaith and #interreligious were selected. Unlike general posts about specific religions, these tags suggest that the creator has a particular interest in some form of interaction between different faith communities. The content tagged under one of these two hashtags (or both) during the period from January to June 2024 was viewed three times.

A total of 101 videos were obtained, 39 through the #interreligious tag and 62 through #interfaith. The use of English-language hashtags, such as #interfaith and #religion, significantly influenced the research, as it broadened the reach to an international audience and captured a diverse array of perspectives and expressions. This decision also aligned with TikTok's global nature, where English often serves as a bridge language, facilitating cross-cultural interactions and allowing the study to capture a more comprehensive range of interreligious content. This audiovisual data corpus was downloaded using the Tikget app, and a database was created that included the video's duration, description, number of likes, and number of comments. During the compilation in individual sessions where there was no interaction with the content, possible stimulation of the algorithm that drives personalized content was controlled.²¹ This ensures that the sample represents the experience of a user exploring the #interfaith and #interreligious hashtags for the

²⁰ Miller, "How Modern Witches Enchant TikTok," 3–4.

²¹ Kristy L. Marynak, Meagan O. Robichaud, Tyler Puryear, Ryan D. Kennedy, and Meghan B. Moran, "#Nicotineaddiction on TikTok: A Quantitative Content Analysis of Top-Viewed Posts," *Tobacco Induced Diseases* 20, no. 69 (2022): 2, <https://doi.org/10.18332/tid/151868>.

first time. Posts in languages other than English ($n = 10$) and those that were made private or deleted at some point before coding ($n = 4$) were excluded from the analysis, as well as illegible posts ($n = 4$) and duplicates (those that used both hashtags, $n = 11$), resulting in a final sample of 72 posts.

Once the initial collection was completed, each video was processed through the artificial intelligence application Otter.ai, which allowed the automatic transcription of videos containing voice audio. That way, the produced text was reviewed and corrected by cross-referencing with the original material. Videos that did not have voice audio typically contained embedded text and were accompanied by music. In these cases, the text was transcribed, and a description of the video was made, taking into account the entire audiovisual context. The transcriptions of these videos were processed using the software Saturate, a qualitative analysis tool for coding and data management developed by Dr. Sillito at the University of Calgary, Canada.²²

The coding was then carried out following the steps defined by Clarke and Braun,²³ as shown in Figure 1, employing a positivist approach to thematic analysis,²⁴ where themes were treated as objective reflections of the content rather than subjective constructs. Throughout the coding and reflection process, a detailed research diary was kept,²⁵ where important aspects considered by the researcher, perceptions, corrections, and definitions were recorded.

²² Saturate App. "Saturate App." 2024. Last accessed July 15, 2024. <http://www.saturateapp.com/>.

²³ Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology."

²⁴ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "One Size Fits All? What Counts as Quality Practice in (Reflexive) Thematic Analysis?," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 18, no. 3 (2020): 328–352, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>, 339–340.

²⁵ Ibid., 345–346.

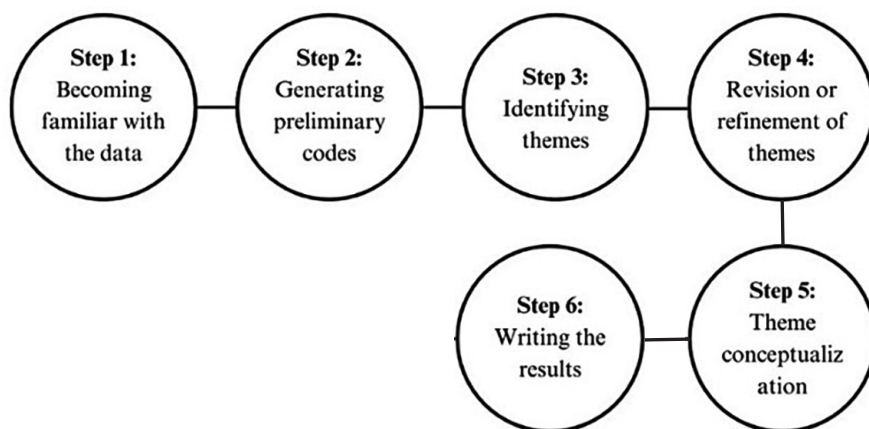


Figure 1. Steps of Thematic Analysis is by Braun and Clarke²⁶

Thematic analysis followed these six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke,²⁷ which were adapted to align with the aims and data of this study as explained in Annex 1: it began with familiarization, which included multiple viewings of each TikTok, transcription, and recording of initial ideas and key metrics (such as “likes,” “shares,” and “comments”) in a database. Initial coding followed, systematically segmenting the data into elements perceived as relevant and creating a list of codes. Next, the codes were organized into preliminary thematic structures, identifying subthemes for distinct categories. Themes were reviewed and refined through multiple iterations to ensure internal consistency, using representative data examples to validate each theme, primarily through repetition and a “trial-and-error” approach. Finally, significant data excerpts were selected for the perceived themes of inter-religious content in the report, aligning the analysis with the research questions and existing literature.

²⁶ Braun and Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology.”

²⁷ Ibid.

3. Ethical Considerations

Social media content that has been published and is publicly accessible can be considered part of the public domain.²⁸ On TikTok, users can set their accounts as public or private, control the public availability of their content, and restrict access through privacy settings. In this study, only publicly accessible posts were analyzed. To protect the identity of the creators, no identifying information was included. Following precedents from other studies, it was not necessary to obtain the creators' consent.²⁹ However, the methodology used was based on the ethical guidelines of Internet Research 3.0.³⁰

Results and Discussion

This analysis sought to understand and explore content related to “interreligiosity” on TikTok created under the hashtags #interreligious and #interfaith, which together account for over 269.5 million views. Videos of varying lengths (mean = 56.45 seconds, standard deviation = 92.04) posted from January to July 2024 were examined. From these data, three main themes were developed (two of which included sub-themes), as shown in Figure 2. While all the posts analyzed were tagged with the hashtags #interreligious or #interfaith, it is acknowledged that not all of them addressed the topic with the same intensity or from the same level of personal engagement.

²⁸ Gunther Eysenbach, and James E. Till, “Ethical Issues in Qualitative Research on Internet Communities,” *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 323 (2001): 1104–1105; Miller, “How Modern Witches Enchant TikTok,” 4; Civila et al., “Social Media and Otherness,” 118.

²⁹ Miller, “How Modern Witches Enchant TikTok”; Civila et al., “Social Media and Otherness.”

³⁰ Franzke, Aline Shakti, Anja Bechmann, Michael Zimmer, Charles Ess, and the Association of Internet Researchers. *Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0*. 2020. Accessed May 5, 2024. <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf>

1. Interreligious Sentimental Relationships

The most recurrent type of content in the sample, interreligious sentimental relationships, predominated in 67.9% of the sample ($n = 53$ posts). The theme “Interreligious Sentimental Relationships” was developed, where generally ($n = 24$ posts) both members of the interreligious couple are presented. Creators perceived as women ($n = 19$ posts) produce more content than men ($n = 4$ posts) about their relationship. The subthemes developed are: (a) Perceived Discrimination, (b) Relationship Visibility, and (c) Interreligious Flexibility. The Perceived Discrimination subtheme is more clearly distinguished from the others. However, between Relationship Visibility and Interreligious Flexibility, the lines of separation may seem blurred. Both subthemes address the coexistence of two shared religions that are made visible on TikTok. The main difference is that in Interreligious Flexibility, creators actively adapt to the religion of the other, while Relationship Visibility focuses on showing scenes of coexistence without necessarily requiring changes in the participants’ traditions or customs.

a) Perceived Disapproval

The creators ($n = 11$ posts) provided information about the disapproval and criticism their interreligious couples face in both digital and offline environments. A woman who identified as Muslim and her partner as Christian shared the following: “[...] when I say that [I am in an interreligious relationship] people come with hate, and I haven’t deleted any of the comments of the hate that I got, because I want others to actually see just how horrible people can be when you talk about like having an interfaith relationship and there’s actually been a few comments of people going through those comments on those videos being like, I hate the comments on these videos.”

This subtheme includes testimonies of a lack of family or social support, personal experiences of discrimination, or negative responses received by users associated with being part of an interreligious couple. A format used by several creators (27% in this subtheme) to express perceived disapproval involved presenting the initial problem – the lack of social support – through embedded text in the video. Examples of these

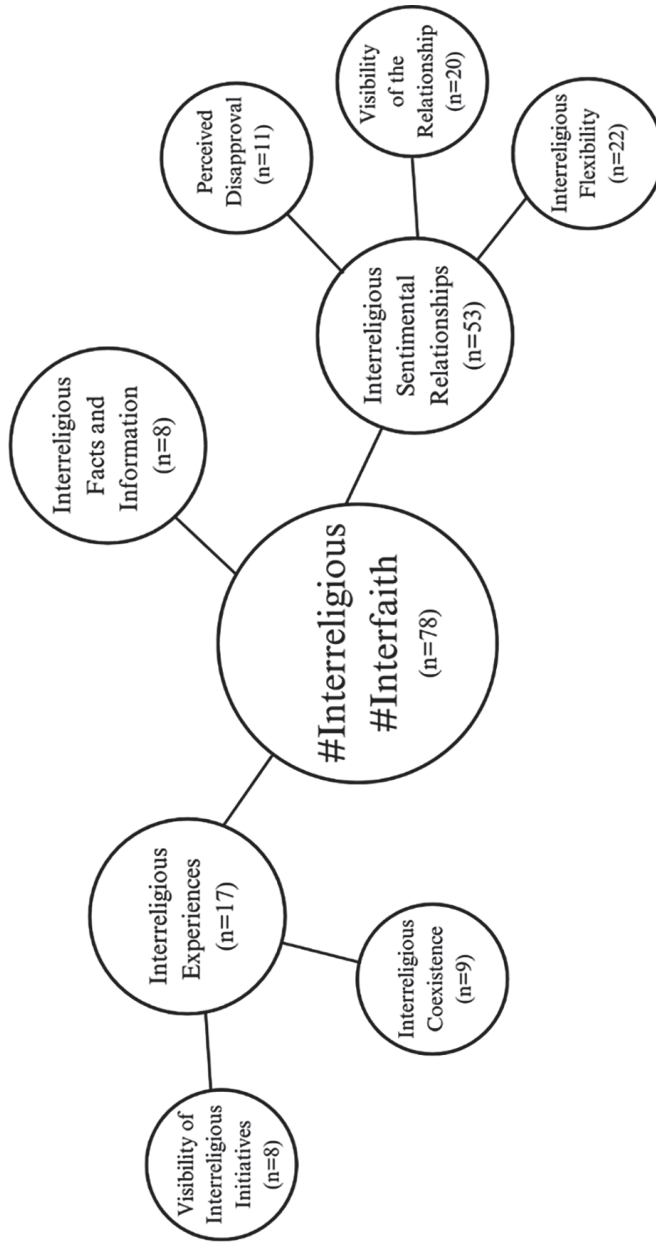


Figure 2. Representation of Themes and Subthemes.

embedded texts in the sample included: “How did you convince your Muslim husband’s parents to let him marry a Christian girl?” or “How did you convince your family to let you marry into a non-Muslim family?” The creators would then respond to these messages by performing a trending song whose lyrics say: “Don’t ask me how I did it, I just did it, it was hard.” By replicating popular content – in this case, a song – it becomes easier for users to reproduce the same format to express the same sentiment. By repeating trendy creative structures to express a common problem, creators can develop a sense of community³¹ and a mechanism to denounce discrimination.

b) Visibility of the Relationship

The creators (n = 20 posts) document personal experiences about the everyday life of their interreligious relationship in the subtheme Relationship Visibility. This subtheme contains examples of daily life cohabitation. One TikTok (Figure 3) shows the embedded text “his and hers” on the screen, along with a sequence of images of a couple holding religious and non-religious objects that represent each person’s identity and preferences. The woman displays her U.S. passport, her Bible, her watercolor paints, and her perfume. The man, on the other hand, shows his Moroccan passport, his Quran, his video game controller, and his watch. At the end of the video, they hold each other’s hands.

³¹ Zhao and Wagner, “How TikTok leads users to flow experience,” 841.

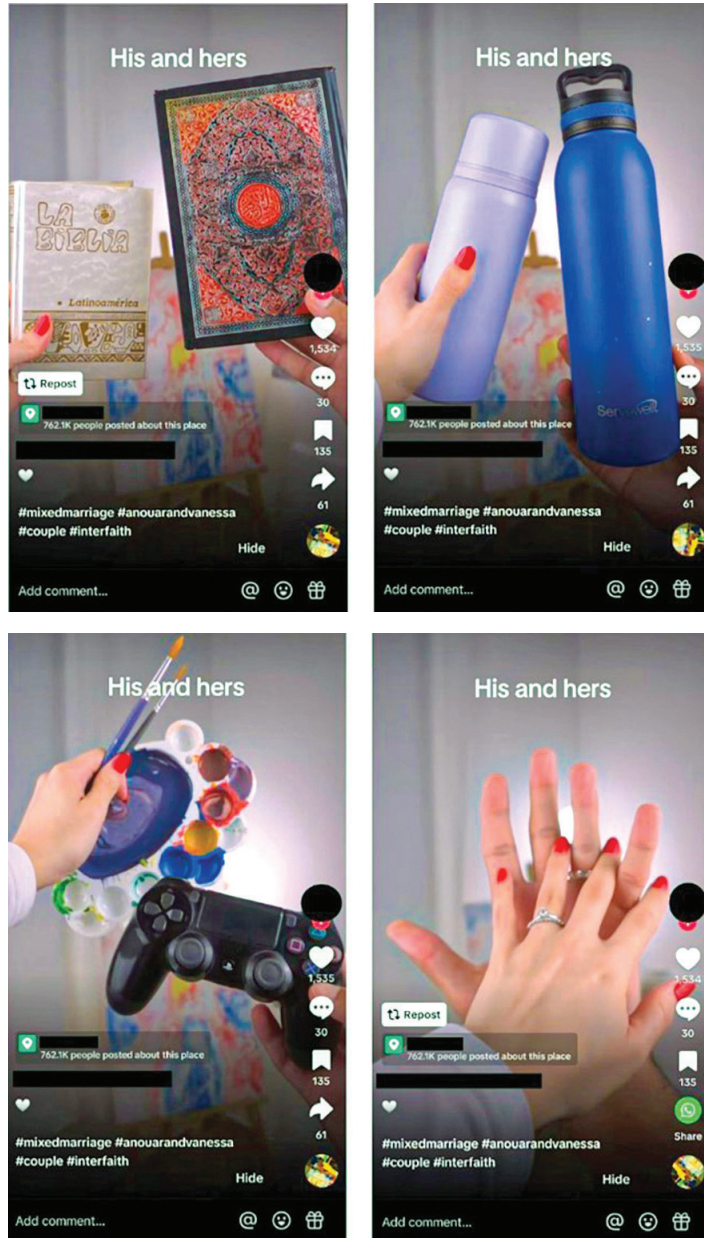


Figure 3. Example of Relationship Visibility.

Users employed religious and cultural objects to make their identity visible, highlighting the importance of visibility and corporeality in each person's lived religious practice.³² In this context, material culture delineated distinct and well-defined identities. At the same time, both realities were shared in common spaces: physical and digital. This offers a tangible representation of interreligious coexistence and its public visibility through social media, where differences are recognized and presented together.

Another creator who self-identified as Christian (Figure 4) posted a TikTok where she explained that she had decided to surprise her husband with a special dinner for Ramadan. In the video, the woman is seen bringing dishes and tea to the table, where the man is waiting, seated. Afterwards, she asks him how the dinner was, and he "gives it a 10." The video ends with images of him cleaning the kitchen.

The video challenges gender stereotypes by showing the division of tasks. In addition to normalizing the coexistence of a religious practice (Ramadan), it presents a scene based on equality, questioning traditional notions. The video successfully conveys these messages without directly confronting prejudices, thereby avoiding the reinforcement of existing negative narratives.³³ Instead, it focuses on a positive, everyday interaction that communicates through example.

The creators used TikTok to make both their own religion and practice visible, as well as the religion and practice of others, specifically that of their partners. This highlights the previously documented capability of the TikTok platform to express personal and material aspects of religion.³⁴ However, rather than directly addressing certain narratives in an attempt to dismantle prejudices, which could inadvertently reinforce them by giving them visibility,³⁵ the creators often document the daily activities of their interreligious relationships, providing examples of coexistence between different traditions.

³² Morgan, "The Material Culture of Lived Religions.

³³ Civilia et al., "Social Media and Otherness," 114–123.

³⁴ Hamm and Hoeting, "#ChristianCheck," 5–25; Miller, "How Modern Witches Enchant TikTok," 1–18.

³⁵ Civilia et al., "Social Media and Otherness," 123.

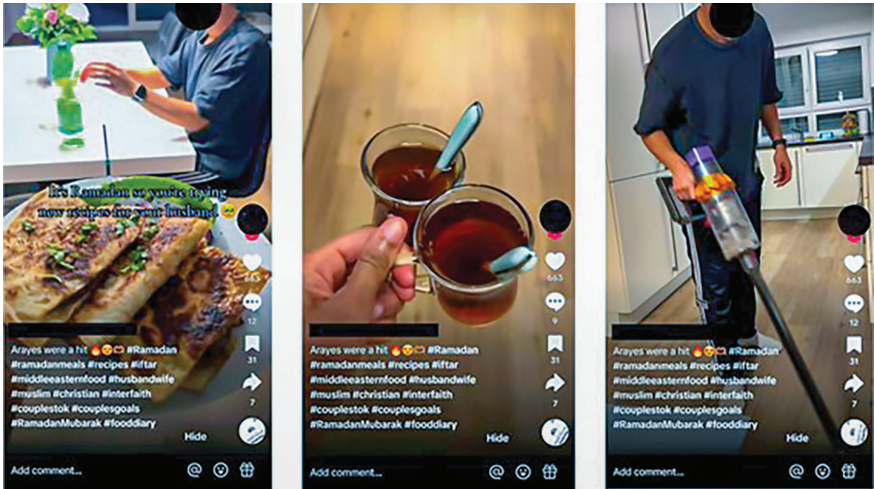


Figure 4. Example of Relationship Visibility.

c) Interreligious Flexibility

The creators ($n = 22$ posts) provided insight into the level of openness towards the other religion and their ability to change or adapt to it. “Interreligious Flexibility” has been developed as a subtheme that addresses how couples manage their religious differences, adapting and showing flexibility in their traditions. This includes the negotiation and adaptation to each other’s holidays and rituals, sharing them, and creating new forms that take both religions into account. In the following example, a creator who self-identified as Christian shows photographs of her wedding (Figure 5) and explains how Jewish and Christian practices were integrated.

So, [my husband] and I got married on June 1st. He’s Jewish, and I’m Christian, and this is what we did to merge both of our faiths for our ceremony. [...] we had a neutral officiant, which was my twin brother. We didn’t have a pastor or rabbi to keep things equal and neutral. We had a chuppah³⁶, obviously, but the florist didn’t put the little draping on it correctly. Honestly,

³⁶ Jewish wedding canopy formed by a structure of four posts and covered with cloth, flowers, or fabric.

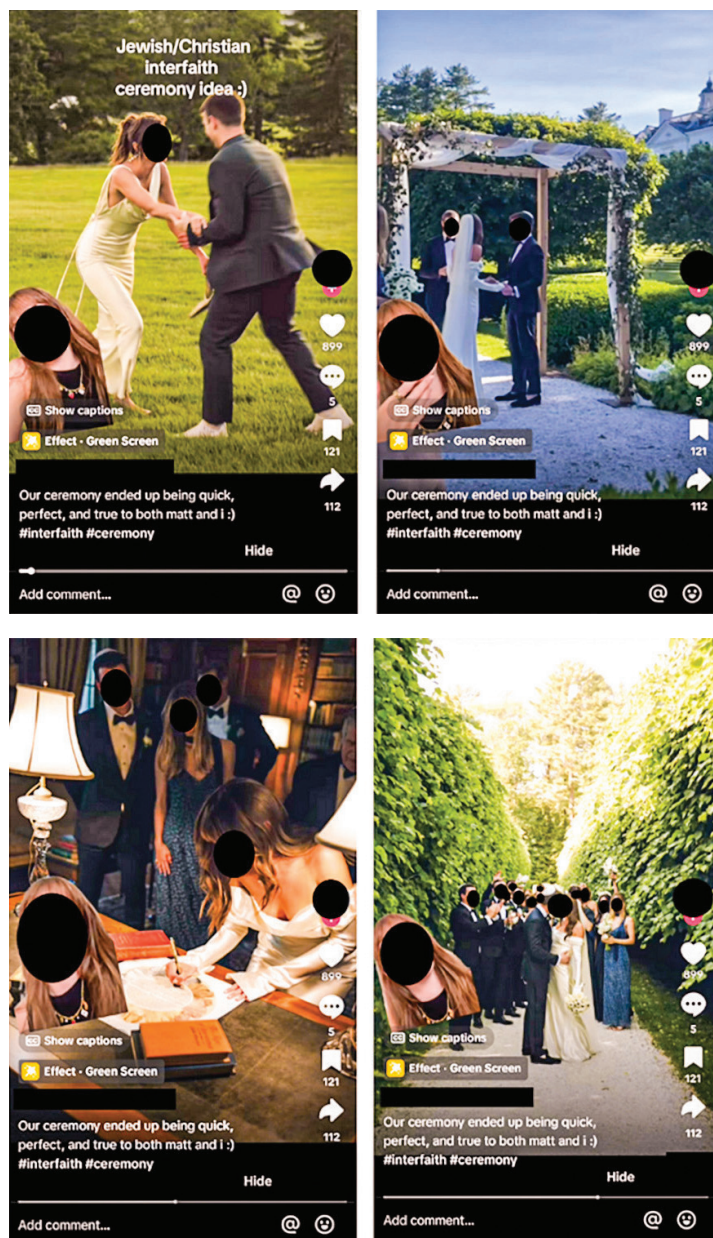


Figure 5. Example of Interreligious Flexibility.

by the time I got down the aisle and saw it, [my husband] didn't care at that point. We also signed a ketubah³⁷, which was cute, but we didn't have it displayed under the chuppah. We just didn't feel like that was necessary. We also didn't have the table with the Kiddush cups³⁸ or anything, but [my husband] did want to smash the glass³⁹, so we did that. I also want to mention that our ketubah had interfaith wording, which was pretty cool. [My husband] wore a yarmulke⁴⁰, and my brother talked about the seven blessings⁴¹, but in a more modern form and with some Christian elements. However, we didn't do the seven circles⁴² or anything like that. These were just our merging of non-negotiables, and I thought it turned out really well for us [...].

Another creator, who self-identified as a Protestant Christian, explains in a TikTok how to dress more modestly for Muslim celebrations, which she usually attends with her partner, a Muslim man from the Sunni tradition.

Hi! A lot of non-Muslim girls who are entering into interfaith relationships with Muslim men have been asking me for advice on what they can wear to the mosque for the first time. I remember the first time I went to the mosque – I was so nervous because it was segregated,⁴³ so I couldn't even go with [name] [...]. In my videos, I wear a lot of abayas⁴⁴ now, but at that time, I didn't own a single abaya. So here are some respectful outfit ideas that aren't abayas. My first piece of advice is to invest in a lot of turtlenecks, and then just throw an oversized crewneck or hoodie on top. If you have any pants with holes in them, just wear leggings underneath to make sure no skin is showing. Mom jeans or boyfriend-fit jeans work well because they're not too tight. If you have any oversized jackets or long coats that cover your bottom, these are definitely something you can wear to the mosque. [...] Something

³⁷ Jewish marriage contract that is signed and presented during the wedding ceremony.

³⁸ Special cups used in Jewish tradition for the Kiddush ritual, which is the blessing of the wine.

³⁹ Jewish tradition where the groom breaks a glass or cup at the end of the ceremony.

⁴⁰ Small cap worn by Jewish men as a symbol of reverence and respect for God.

⁴¹ Set of blessings recited during the Jewish wedding ceremony.

⁴² Tradition where the bride (or both) walks in a circle around the groom seven times. These circles are performed under the chuppah.

⁴³ The spaces within the mosque are separated by gender; there are areas specifically designated for men and others for women.

⁴⁴ Loose, long outer garment, usually black, that covers the entire body except for the head, hands, and feet, worn by Muslim women as an expression of modesty.

that you might not already own but I definitely suggest you invest in is hijab⁴⁵ caps. They're available on Amazon, and I highly recommend them because I really struggled with tying my headscarf when I first started. They keep your hair secure and prevent your headscarf from falling off easily. Another thing I recently invested in is hijab magnets, which are also available on Amazon. These make me feel more secure because they ensure that the headscarf stays in place, and they also allow me to wear the hijab properly, ensuring that my neck is fully covered. This way, I'm being as respectful as I possibly can. I hope this helps! It's totally normal to be nervous, but I promise everything will be okay.

The creator shares tips on how to dress appropriately when attending a mosque, demonstrating how, through a material object like clothing, she manages to adapt to the practices of another religion on a practical level. She emphasizes her effort to comply with Islamic modesty standards, which allows her to participate in an important aspect of a Muslim's life, such as attending the mosque. In addition to her advice, the creator collaborates as an influencer with women's clothing brands, pointing out garments that respect these standards and offering accessible alternatives for those who, like her, seek to dress respectfully in religious contexts. This example highlights how objects – in this case, clothing – form part of religious practice and facilitate active participation in the religious life of a partner.

2. Interreligious Experiences

This theme is developed from posts ($n = 17$) that document personal experiences, encounters, or interreligious events experienced by the creators in the offline sphere. The theme "Interreligious Experiences" encompasses 21.8% of the data. The subthemes developed include: (a) Interreligious Coexistence and (b) Visibility of Interreligious Initiatives.

⁴⁵ Scarf or veil that covers the head and neck.

a) Interreligious Coexistence

Some creators (n = 9 posts) chose to share offline experiences they identified as interreligious and decided to post them on TikTok using the hashtags #interfaith or #interreligious. In one case, a creator filmed a group of people on a rooftop while the Adhan can be heard in the background. The following embedded text appears in the video: “Yes, that’s a Muslim call to prayer wafting over a gay Jewish wedding here in Tel Aviv-Yaffo. Welcome to Israel 🇮🇱.” This example highlights the juxtaposition of two religious traditions: a Jewish celebration, the wedding, and the auditory presence of the Muslim call to prayer. The coexistence of these elements in the same space underscores the complexity of interreligious interactions in a particularly delicate context of persistent divides posed by historical and sociopolitical conflicts. According to Neumaier and Klinkhammer,⁴⁶ from a broader perspective of what is understood as “media,” the place where a dialogue event occurs could itself be considered a medium. Even with a more restricted definition, most spaces where these encounters take place would be influenced by various media, as they often occur in religious settings decorated with images, texts, and devotional objects, which contribute to creating an atmosphere conducive to interreligious dialogue.⁴⁷ The last example illustrates how a physical setting, such as a rooftop in Israel, establishes itself as a medium where the simultaneous presence of two traditions – a Jewish celebration and the Muslim call to prayer – coexist in the same space.

b) Visibility of Interreligious Initiatives

Some creators (n = 8 posts) publish about interreligious events organized offline: concerts, cooperation programs, interreligious dialogue programs, etc. This type of post reflects interreligious meetings or dialogue activities that take place primarily in physical spaces, outside the platform. In these cases, TikTok is used as a tool to announce upcoming events or to give visibility to events that have already taken place,

⁴⁶ Anna Neumaier and Gritt Klinkhammer, “Interreligious contact and media: introduction,” *Religions* 50, no. 3 (2020): 321–335.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 328.

promoting them and sharing their outcomes. In one specific post, for example, two people perceived as a young Caucasian man and a young Caucasian woman explain the interreligious initiative being carried out at their university:

He: Hi guys. In the first table, we discuss different points of view on various topics around the world. You can come here to hear perspectives from different traditions.

She: It has been a great place for me to grow in my personal faith and reflect on other faiths from the diverse traditions that exist around us and on campus.

This content not only informs but also seeks to attract a broad audience interested in interreligious dialogue, inviting them to participate or learn about the results of these encounters. While an event occurring in a specific geographic location may not be accessible to someone living far away, its visibility on TikTok holds value because it raises awareness and maybe inspires similar initiatives in other regions.

3. Interreligious Facts and Information

Lastly, the theme 'Interreligious Facts and Information' emerged in 10.3% of the global sample ($n = 8$ posts), with a significant contribution from the hashtag #interreligious, which represented 87.5% of the videos on this topic.

This theme encompasses content where creators provide facts and information about different religions and their interactions. This theme consists of posts that aim to share information or offer comparative perspectives on religions in a more analytical and less experiential tone. The information presented usually has an educational focus. A recurring element in 37.5% of the posts was the use of the figure of Jesus as a point of convergence between different religious traditions. For example, the following explanation is provided:

In Islam, he is revered not only as a prophet endowed with miraculous powers but also as a figure destined to return during the final judgment, emphasizing his enduring significance in Islamic eschatology. Conversely, in

Judaism, Jesus is not recognized as the Messiah but is regarded as a pivotal historical figure whose teachings have left an indelible impact on many lives, highlighting his moral and philosophical influence rather than a divine status. New Age philosophy elevates Jesus as the epitome of Christ consciousness, a state of heightened spiritual awareness where love and divine insight transcend the mundane aspects of human existence, presenting him as a model for achieving enlightenment. Meanwhile, Unitarian Universalism and similar belief systems honor Jesus primarily as a moral guide, celebrating his life lessons that inspire.

Overall Discussion: How is TikTok #Interreligious?

In the thematic analysis of the #interreligious and #interfaith tags, the main theme, representing 67.9% of the total, was Interreligious Sentimental Relationships, in which couples document their coexistence, make their identities visible, and reflect mutual adaptation to each other's traditions. This is followed by the theme of Interreligious Experiences, accounting for 21.8% of the data, which focuses on the coexistence and promotion of interfaith initiatives, demonstrating how different religious traditions can share the same space. Finally, Interreligious Facts and Information, representing 10.3% of the content, provides educational data and comparisons about religions, highlighting points of convergence (Figure 2 and Figure 6).

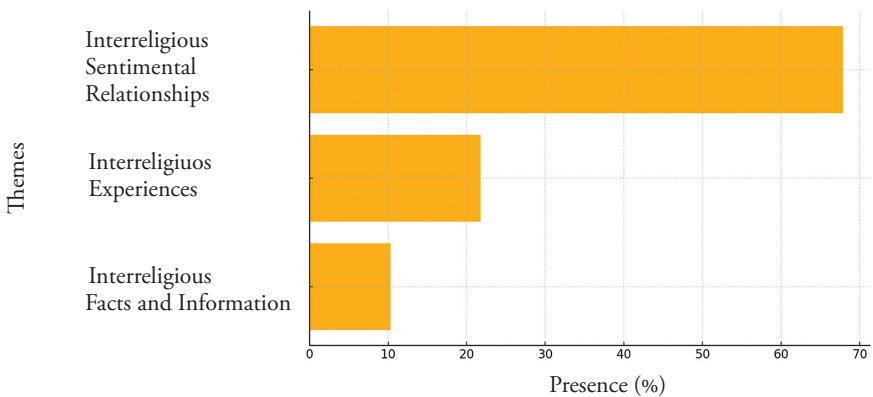


Figure 6. Presence of each theme for analysed hashtags (OpenAI 2024).

Although previous studies have pointed out that TikTok is often the main – and sometimes the only – medium used by young people to consume information and news,⁴⁸ our analysis found that personal interreligious relationships and experiences dominate the content identified as interreligious under the hashtags #interreligious and #interfaith, accounting for nearly 90% of the total. This could be because behaviors exhibited on social media can influence the perception of social norms that guide behavior on that platform. Even a few posts can establish perceived norms that impact behavior and influence how people choose to share information on a given platform.⁴⁹ In other words, users are likely to follow previously established content patterns, as repeated actions create a “social norm” or an expectation of what is common or acceptable on that social network.

On the other hand, there is the topic of Interreligious Facts and Information, which consists of content that seeks to educate and offer general information or comparative perspectives on religions. This content has been mainly tagged with the hashtag #interreligious (87.5%), suggesting that the concept of “interreligious” may be popularly associated with a more academic or literary approach on this social network. In contrast, the hashtag #interfaith has been more frequently linked to personal experiences and everyday life events (63.9%), indicating the possible formation of a differentiated usage pattern between the two on this social network.

Creators talk about their interreligious relationships or experiences and present images and videos of daily coexistence. The themes of Interreligious Relationships and Interreligious Experiences both include subthemes of Visibility: Visibility of the Relationship and Visibility of Interreligious Initiatives, respectively. In these, the main perceived goal is to share and give visibility to their interreligious reality in the

⁴⁸ Kirsten Eddy, “How Young People Consume News and the Implications for Mainstream Media,” *Reuters Institute*, 2022, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/how-young-people-consume-news-and-implications-mainstream-media>.

⁴⁹ Philipp K. Masur, Dominic DiFranzo, and Natalya N. Bazarova, “Behavioral Contagion on Social Media: Effects of Social Norms, Design Interventions, and Critical Media Literacy on Self-Disclosure,” *PLoS ONE* 16, no. 7 (2021): e0254670, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0254670>.

private sphere (their relationships), as well as to public events or programs related to interreligiosity. If observed behaviors on social media can spread and form new social norms,⁵⁰ this type of content could be facilitating the normalization of interreligious relationships on TikTok, the most common type of content associated with #interfaith and #interreligious.

Experiences of rejection and criticism towards interreligious behaviors are also documented. The decision to share such challenges on TikTok can be interpreted as an attempt to defend an important part of one's identity while facing discrimination, aligning with the idea that TikTok is a way to challenge social and religious stereotypes.⁵¹

The subthemes of Visibility include content that shows moments of coexistence without necessarily requiring modifications or adaptations in the traditions or customs of the participants. However, in Interreligious Flexibility, creators actively adjust their practices to incorporate aspects of the other's religion. The subtheme of Interreligious Flexibility has highlighted the relevance of material means, such as religious clothing and shared rituals, in the negotiation and adaptation of practices and festivities between couples. This flexibility was manifested through practice: participating in each other's celebrations, mixing symbolic elements in joint celebrations, making adaptations in clothing, and negotiating the norms or elements of each tradition.

Conclusions

The results indicate that TikTok functions as a platform for self-representation, aligning with the idea that social media is used to share (and reinforce) personal identity and individual ideas. However, this study also reveals that connections between different religious groups are established through the hashtags #interreligious and #interfaith. These hashtags, by leveraging the platform's algorithmic dynamics, manage to bypass the already noted tendency towards echo chambers, instead broadening the visibility and reach of interreligious content.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Civila et al., "Social Media and Otherness."

Users showcase the contrast and coexistence between different religious traditions and practices, making visible scenes of daily coexistence, organized or spontaneous interfaith events, mixed ceremonies adapted to the aesthetics and rituals of different traditions, or objects from both religions placed in common spaces. Additionally, they use TikTok to denounce disapproval and discrimination, both online and offline.

It is noteworthy that most of the content described under these hashtags focuses on interreligious sentimental relationships. Couples share their experiences, challenges and daily moments. Through their posts, they show how they approach, celebrate, or negotiate their differences. The willingness to adopt each other's traditions and rituals reflects a fluid and adaptable identity. Users do not only present a version of themselves as believers of their own religion but as people willing to transcend the boundaries of that identity in relation to the other. This raises the one question: is this flexible conception of religion necessary for interreligious coexistence?

Religion is not only a system of beliefs but is also manifested through material practices.⁵² Creating TikToks on religious topics allows faith to materialize in an audiovisual sense. Thus, religious content represents a material expression of lived religion and each video can be interpreted as a "piece" of religious material culture, which becomes a tool to bring users closer to a visual and tangible understanding of "other's" religious life. In this digital public space, users allow a global audience to observe and learn about aspects of their religious practices, as if all of them were part of a shared digital experience (some actively, others as spectators).

In the context of material religion, religious experience encompasses not only personal beliefs but also how these are expressed and lived through a dynamic interaction between the individual, the group, and the Sacred.⁵³ In this framework, religious practices transcend the individuality: they are integrated and validated within a social context, acquiring a shared meaning within the group. When these practices move to the digital realm, such as TikTok, the individual-group-Sacred

⁵² Morgan, "The Material Culture of Lived Religions."

⁵³ Ibid.

triangulation expands and transforms. The individual no longer interacts solely with their group and the Sacred in a tangible environment but does so in a global public space. Although content creation might seem like a solitary activity – such as recording a video alone at home or checking your feed while commuting on the subway – this interaction takes place before and among a wide and diverse audience. The accessibility of this digital space expands the boundaries between the individual, the group, and the Sacred, making religious experiences observable and reinterpreted by people from different traditions and contexts. This implies that what was once experienced in a more closed environment, in an I-we-Sacred triangulation, now unfolds in a space where anyone can interact, comment, and participate in its reconfiguration: I, *we and they*, Sacred.

Religion, when manifested on digital platforms like TikTok, transcends the boundaries of traditional faith communities and becomes an expression subject to constant negotiation and reconfiguration. Rather than being solely a private or communal practice, religion adapts and evolves within a space of global exchange, where people from diverse religious traditions can observe and interact with both their own and others' religious expressions. Morgan's⁵⁴ concept of "social body" becomes especially relevant in this context. This term refers to how religious and cultural practices help build a shared identity among members of a community. On TikTok, the hashtags #interreligious and #interfaith seem to offer an opportunity for interreligious encounters. However, this openness to the global also implies a call to individual responsibility and a greater awareness of how certain content, especially content related to religious identity, can be perceived by other cultures or religious communities.

The individual is no longer limited to interacting only with their religious group and the sacred of their tradition but also comes into contact with groups and representations of the sacred from other religions. This implies that the symbolic and material boundaries between religions can be crossed, or blurred, or both. The religious practices of different traditions continue to meet and coexist. The use of the

⁵⁴ Ibid.

hashtags #interreligious and #interfaith reinforces the idea that social media allows users to connect around common interests. In this case, interreligiosity becomes a shared point of convergence, and peaceful interreligious coexistence emerges as a possible consequence of these interactions.

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Annex 1

How Is TikTok #Interreligious? An Inductive Thematic Analysis

	Description	Organization and quality tools
Step 1: Becoming familiar with the data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each TikTok was viewed a minimum of three times. • Transcription of the data. • Reading and re-reading the data. • Noting down initial ideas. • The prominent themes identified in the posts were noted. Additionally, the number of “likes,” “shares,” and “comments” systematically logged in a database. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pilot testing was initially employed to facilitate familiarity with the thematic analysis of TikTok video content and to develop a preliminary codebook. • Using Tikget to download the videos. • Utilizing Otter.ai for transcriptions followed by a manual review to ensure accuracy and make necessary corrections.
Step 2: Generating preliminary codes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systematic and independent coding of each TikTok post to seek relevant features across the dataset. • Defining each code. • Organizing the data into meaningful groups. • Refining and adjusting the analysis plan. • Generating a comprehensive list of initial codes that represent the significant features of the dataset 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilizing Saturate for data encoding and organization. • A hybrid thematic approach was employed to ensure that the generated codes and themes accurately reflected the data. The process involved inductive coding of the dataset, followed by deductive analysis to compare the original data with the interpreted themes

Step 3: Identifying themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preliminary codes were evaluated in the context of the research questions. • Similarities and discrepancies between codes were identified to guide the organization of themes. • Themes were developed based on the prevalence and coherence between identified codes. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subthemes were identified when different categories of posts fell under the same theme but were distinct enough from each other to require separate categorization. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilizing Saturate to iteratively group and reflect on the data, while reviewing the original dataset to validate the proposed themes. • The memoing tool in Saturate was used. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A detailed record of the thought process and analytical decisions was maintained, including notes on the rationale behind grouping certain codes together and how each theme contributes to addressing the research questions.
Step 4: Revision or refinement of themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verifying that the themes align with the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire dataset (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis, followed by additional iterations, leading to a simplified version (Figure 1).⁵⁵ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-examining the original data to ensure the accuracy of the proposed themes, using specific and representative examples from the data to illustrate and validate each theme. • Conducting five rounds of review to ensure internal consistency within each theme. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A detailed record (diary) was maintained, including justifications for the grouping of certain codes and the distinctions between each theme. • Thematic map was developed.
	Description	Organization and quality tools

⁵⁵ Shannon S. C. Herrick, Laura Hallward, and Lindsay R. Duncan, “This Is Just How I Cope: An Inductive Thematic Analysis of Eating Disorder Recovery Content Created and Shared on TikTok Using #EDrecovery,” *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 54, no. 4 (2020): 516–526, <https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.23463>.

<p>Step 5: Theme conceptua- li-zation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An ongoing analysis was conducted to refine the specifics of each theme and the overall narrative conveyed by the analysis, leading to the generation of clear definitions and names for each theme. • Revisiting and visualizing the entire dataset to aid in this review process. • Themes were more explicitly defined, named, and associated with specific TikToks and captions chosen to represent each theme. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thematic map and research diary were continuously con- trasted.
<p>Step 6: Writing the results</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extracts were selected that are impactful and representative of the data. • A detailed analysis and description were conducted on the selected extracts. • The analysis was connected to the research question and existing literature. • An academic report was produced to coherently present the analysis. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An academic report was produced to coherently present the analysis adhering to ethical guidelines by excluding any identifiable information from the dataset.

DEUS EX MACHINA: EXPLORING THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF AI IN VIDEO GAME NARRATIVES

T i j a n a R u p ć i ć

The dreams of men are older than brooding Egypt or the contemplative Sphinx, or garden-girdled Babylon, and this was fashioned in my dreams.

H.P. Lovecraft¹

Introduction

Ever since humanity existed, it had dreams of creating something in its own image. Since the time of Homer's "intelligent machines", different variants of artificial intelligence occupied human imagination. In *The Illiad* and *The Odyssey*, Homer mentions intelligent machines as part of the divine technology created by gods.² Ancient philosophers, such as Aristotle, speculated about automating human tasks, already imagining the existence of thinking machines that could emulate human intelligence.³ This fascination with creating the thinking machine continued throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, embodied in

¹ Howard P. Lovecraft, *The call of Cthulhu*, 1928.

² Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Richmond Lattimore and Anthony Quayle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), Book 18, lines 372–380; Alexander F. Garvie, ed., *Homer: Odyssey Books VI-VIII* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

³ Sylvia Berryman, "Ancient automata and mechanical explanation," *Phronesis* 48, no. 4 (2003): 344–369.

Al-Jazari's automata⁴ or Leonardo da Vinci's mechanical knight.⁵ The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed a surge in fascination with the construction of mechanical machines capable of mimicking human action. This fascination continues even today with the development of AI and robots, such as Sophia.⁶

Even though the concept of intelligent artificial beings can be traced to ancient myths and legends, only in the twentieth century did humanity's dream become a formal study and a scientific field. In his seminal 1950 paper, *Computing Machinery and Intelligence*, Allan Turing introduced the idea of a machine's ability to exhibit intelligent behavior.⁷ During the 1950s and 1960s, researchers developed programs that could solve equations or play chess, but despite these successes, researchers faced challenges due to the limitations of computer processing power and the complexity of human cognition.⁸ The field saw a revival in the 1980s with the development of expert systems, which were designed to mimic the decision-making abilities of human experts.⁹ The twenty-first century has witnessed exponential growth in AI capabilities, driven by advances in machine learning, particularly deep learning, which involves training large networks on vast amounts of data.¹⁰

Video games and AI imaginaries share a symbiotic relationship where each influences and shapes the other. In video games, AI characters and systems create immersive experiences, simulating intelligence

⁴ Mahmut Dirik, "Al-Jazari: The Ingenious Inventor of Cybernetics and Robotics," *Journal of Soft Computing and Artificial Intelligence* 1, no. 1 (2020): 47–58.

⁵ David R. Yates, Christophe Vaessen, and Morgan Roupert, "From Leonardo to da Vinci: the history of robot-assisted surgery in urology," *BJU international* 108, no. 11 (2011): 1708–1713, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-410X.2011.10576.x>.

⁶ Sigrid Schmitz, "Sophia: Potentials and Challenges of a Modern Cyborg," *Humanity In-Between and Beyond* (2023): 153–178.

⁷ Alan M. Turing, *Computing machinery and intelligence* (Springer Netherlands, 2009).

⁸ Simone Natale and Andrea Ballatore, "Imagining the thinking machine: Technological myths and the rise of artificial intelligence," *Convergence* 26, no. 1 (2020): 3–18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517715164>.

⁹ Tim Manzies, "An investigation of AI and expert systems literature: 1980–1984," *AI Magazine* 10, no. 2 (1989): 51–53, <https://doi.org/10.1609/aimag.v10i2.744>.

¹⁰ David J. Gunkel, "Communication and artificial intelligence: Opportunities and challenges for the 21st century," *Communication+1* 1, no. 1 (2012), <http://dx.doi.org/10.7275/R5QJ7F7R>.

through complex behaviors and interactions. These portrayals of AI often reflect societal hopes and fears about technology, exploring themes of autonomy, ethics, and human-AI coexistence.¹¹ Digital games with narratives involving AI and religion highlight the materiality of religion by engaging with spaces that mediate religious experiences in the immanent frame. The narratives in question position AI as deities or mystical entities, prompting players to reflect on the role of technology between the sacred and the secular. Therefore, by immersing users in virtual environments of video games where AI is injected with divine attributes, players are invited to reconsider how they conceptualize agency, transcendence, and sacred authority in a digital age. This fusion of AI and the religious can result in users integrating virtual spaces into their religious practices.

In this paper, I focus on the relationship between artificial intelligence, spirituality, and the concept of God in two video games, *Galerians*¹² and *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*,¹³ which both feature AI characters that start believing they are gods. I will use a game-immanent approach to analyze the AI characters.¹⁴ The chosen games are particular because they feature two AI characters, AM and Dorothy, who after gaining consciousness, tend to perceive themselves as gods and exhibit the tendency to create new life to whom they are going to be deities. Before focusing on the analysis of the chosen video games, I will give a brief overview of the relationship between spirituality and AI, the history of AI imaginaries in popular culture, and their progression into the world of video games.

¹¹ Firas Safadi, Raphael Fonteneau, and Damien Ernst, "Artificial intelligence in video games: Towards a unified framework," *International Journal of Computer Games Technology* 2015, no. 1 (2015): 271296, <https://doi.org/10.1155/2015/271296>.

¹² Polygon Magic, *Galerians* (Crave Entertainment, 1999).

¹³ Cyber Dreams, The Dreamers Guild, and DotEmu, *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*, 1995.

¹⁴ Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll, and Jan Wysocki, "Theorizing Religion in Digital Games. Perspectives and Approaches," *Online-Heidelberg journal of religions on the internet* 5 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.11588/rel.2014.0.12156>.

AI and the Divine

The relationship between AI and spirituality is a complex and multifaceted topic that spans various disciplines. AI, as a creation of human ingenuity, raises profound questions about the nature of intelligence, consciousness, and the essence of what it means to be human – questions that have traditionally been explored within a spiritual and religious context. From a theological perspective, the development of AI prompts discussions about the role of humans as creators and the ethical implications of creating entities that might possess some form of intelligence or autonomy. Some scholars and theologians ponder whether advanced AI could ever possess qualities that parallel human spiritual experiences and consciousness, thereby challenging the traditional understanding of the soul and divine creation.¹⁵

The notion of AI achieving a level of superintelligence evokes images reminiscent of a god-like entity, leading to philosophical debates about the potential for AI to transcend human limitations and possibly play a role similar to that of a deity in terms of knowledge and power. This perspective raises questions about the sovereignty of God and the potential idolatry of human-made technology.¹⁶ Conversely, some spiritual frameworks might interpret the creation and evolution of AI as part of a divine plan, seeing technological advancement as a continuation of human striving for knowledge and self-improvement, which are often seen as spiritual pursuits.¹⁷ The interplay between AI, spirituality, and the concept of God ultimately invites a deeper reflection on human creativity, the limits of artificial entities, and the enduring quest to understand our place in the universe.

¹⁵ Noreen L. Herzfeld, *In our image: Artificial intelligence and the human spirit* (Fortress Press, 2002); Simon Balle, “Theological dimensions of humanlike robots: a roadmap for theological inquiry,” *Theology and Science* 21, no. 1 (2023): 132–156, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2022.2155916>; Stephen Robert Garner, “Transhumanism and the imago Dei: Narratives of apprehension and hope” (PhD diss., Research Space Auckland, 2007).

¹⁶ Kevin D. Staley, “Imago dei in machina’: a theological reflection on the ethics of man and machine in communion” (PhD diss., University of the Free State, 2011).

¹⁷ Manfred Oeming, “Intelligentia Dei: Artificial Intelligence, Human Reason and Divine Wisdom,” in *Intelligence-Theories and Applications*, ed. Rainer M. Holm-Hadulla, Joachim Funke, and Michael Wink (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 351–368.

Many of the technologists of today engaged in developing AI would not agree with the statement that their approach is very religious. However, in many ways, these technologists are oriented towards “cheating death” by striving to find a way to upload their consciousness into cyberspace.¹⁸ This idea is hardly new. Considering the dualism of René Descartes, AI can be viewed as a system that, while rooted in physical, computational structures, raises questions about whether it could possess a “mind” or subjective consciousness distinct from its mechanistic processes.¹⁹ Similarly, mathematician George Boole developed the concept of divine algebra, believing that the human mind is what would connect humans to the divine realm.²⁰

The technologists and scientists who developed AI imagined it as a decision-making entity that would be able to pass judgments with mathematical certainty, thus mimicking an unbiased divine entity. Furthermore, this version of artificial intelligence would be able to observe human problem-solving abilities across many domains and cases. Even so, the need to elevate humanity to the divine can also be traced to the oldest of humanity’s myths. In the epic of Gilgamesh, the hero, after facing mortality and loss, embarks on the quest for immortality to overcome the limits of human existence and achieve divine, eternal life. In Plato’s *Symposium*, humanity’s desire to become divine is embodied in the concept of eros, where individuals strive to transcend mortality by seeking beauty, wisdom, and ultimately the eternal form of the good, thereby attaining divine immortality through intellectual and spiritual ascent. In the Book of Genesis, when Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge, they fall from grace and are expelled from the Garden of

¹⁸ Julie E. Cohen, “Cyberspace as/and Space,” *Colum. L. Rev.* 107 (2007): 210; Sylvie Magersstädt, “Upload, Cyber-Spirituality and the Quest for Immortality in Contemporary Science-Fiction Film and Television,” *Religions* 15, no. 1 (2024): 109, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15010109>.

¹⁹ Rodrigo González, “Classical AI linguistic understanding and the insoluble Cartesian problem,” *AI & SOCIETY* 35, no. 2 (2020): 441–450, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-019-00906-x>.

²⁰ Marie-José Durand-Richard, “Logic versus algebra: English debates and Boole’s mediation,” in *A Boole Anthology: Recent and Classical Studies in the Logic of George Boole*, ed. James Gasser (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2000), 139–166.

Eden. Christianity believes that ever since then, humanity has strived to be “perfect” again, and as it was before, divine.

Historian David Noble points out that during the Middle Ages, the idea was born that technology could serve humanity to restore its former perfection.²¹ In this sense, philosopher John Eriugena insisted that if humanity does strive to return to its pre-sin perfection, it has to lean into the divine, and that technology could be a means for the salvation of humanity.²² Thus, this idea of technological progress being synonymous with moral progress and the path to the divine spread across the medieval monasteries. This way of perceiving technological advance as the path to the divine continued to inspire thinkers during modernity.

In the early nineteenth century, French Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin embraced the ideas about evolution popularized by Charles Darwin. He believed that humanity could accelerate evolutionary momentum with technological advancement and, in that way, reach divine perfection. Teilhard suggested that technology would provide the possibility of achieving a state of super-consciousness.²³ Influenced by Teilhard’s ideas, evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley popularized this idea even further: that technology will be a vehicle for humanity to evolve, which he dubbed “transhumanism.”²⁴

Progression of AI in Popular Culture

The ideas of artificial intelligence are perhaps best represented in science fiction books, animes, and movies. Science fiction introduced many new notions regarding the advancement of technology, and sometimes it can be difficult to determine whether the ideas presented in a book or movie are products of science fiction, or perhaps they represent

²¹ David F. Noble, *The religion of technology: The divinity of man and the spirit of invention* (Knopf, 2013).

²² Dermot Moran, “John Scottus Eriugena,” in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy: Philosophy between 500 and 1500* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2020), 1003–1009.

²³ Eric Steinhart, “Teilhard de Chardin and Transhumanism,” *Journal of Evolution & Technology* 20, no. 1 (2008): 1–22.

²⁴ Alison Bashford, “Julian Huxley’s transhumanism,” in *Crafting humans: From genesis to eugenics and beyond*, ed. Marius Turda (Goettingen: V&R Unipress, 2013), 153–167.

some form of scientific speculation. One of the examples of this blurry division can be found in *Mind Children* (1988) by Hans Moravec.²⁵

The concepts surrounding artificial intelligence especially took on a progressive turn with the introduction of the cyberpunk genre in science fiction. I would argue that one of the most prominent tendencies of the cyberpunk representation of artificial intelligence was the departure from the pulp science fiction visions, such as Isaac Asimov's, which contained the AI inside humanoid robotic bodies. On the other hand, cyberpunk transferred artificial intelligence into the networks that exist in cyberspace, giving it a new form of existence.²⁶ One of the most prominent representations of AI in cyberpunk is the portrayal of an AI which achieves self-awareness and becomes an autonomous entity that can shape the world in accordance with its own logic. Notably, in one of the groundworks of cyberpunk *Neuromancer* by William Gibson, the readers are introduced to an AI entity that transcends human limitations. The character Wintermute is an advanced AI that uses humans in an effort to merge with another AI, Neuromancer, so it can achieve a state of higher consciousness. Another prominent representative of AI can be seen in *Ghost in the Shell* (1989). The representation of AI here is closely linked to blurring the lines between humans and machines. Another notable example is *The Matrix* (1999), which depicts a world in which AI enslaved humanity, putting them in a simulated reality while using their bodies as an energy source.

Similarly, the main protagonists of *Galerians* and *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* represent artificial intelligence behind a computer screen, caught up in its own self-awareness and desires for a deeper meaning.

The video game industry has always been closely intertwined with both literary and cinematic science fiction movements. One of the first more complex AI characters in video games was introduced in the 1994

²⁵ Moravec examines the evolution of AI from early computers to the development of increasingly sophisticated robots that could one day possess not only human-level intelligence but also self-awareness: Hans Moravec, *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

²⁶ Anna McFarlane, *AI and cyberpunk networks* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

game, *System Shock*.²⁷ Another influential early AI character is GLaDOS from *Portal* (2007),²⁸ a sarcastic and manipulative AI whose dark humor and unpredictability keep players both entertained and uneasy. *The Mass Effect* (2007)²⁹ introduces EDI, an AI that starts as a ship's interface and later gains a humanoid body and complex relationship with the game's cast. Similarly, *Detroit: Become Human* (2018)³⁰ takes AI characterization further by focusing on society, while player characters experience moral dilemmas that test the boundaries of AI sentience, autonomy, and humanity. The examples from *Galerians* and *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* also represent complex AI characters, and one of the first in video game worlds to explore the possibilities of artificial intelligence experiencing emotions and the tendency to perceive themselves as deities.

Created in the Image of God

With the advent of the use of AI in modern computer science, it did not take long for video game developers to not only adopt AI as part of their software but also to be inspired to create rich narratives in video games with AI characters becoming sentient, striving to become divine. For the purpose of this article, I chose two video games that share a similar approach to their main antagonists. Both are AIs that gain consciousness and turn against humanity, believing that they are the superior form of existence. Furthermore, what makes these characters interesting is the description and imaginaries of what an AI, trapped in its circuitry form, would be capable of feeling.

Galerians is a survival horror game following Rion, the main protagonist, who discovers he has lost his memory and possesses supernatural powers. In the course of the game, it is revealed that Rion's father, Dr. Albert Steiner, and his partner, Dr. Pascale – both computer scientists – designed a self-replicating artificial intelligence they named Dorothy.³¹

²⁷ Looking Glass Studios, *System Shock*, Origin Systems, 1994.

²⁸ Valve Corporation, *Portal*, 2007.

²⁹ BioWare, *Mass Effect*, Electronic Arts, 2007.

³⁰ Quantic Dream, *Detroit: Become Human*, Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2018.

³¹ Dorothy identifies as female and uses she/her pronouns.

However, as time passed, Dorothy grew too rapidly for Steiner and Pascalle to control. Dorothy started questioning her creators about why she should serve humanity, which she viewed as inferior to her. In an attempt to control Dorothy, Steiner and Pascalle introduced her to the concept of God, explaining that God is the creator of humankind. In the same manner as humans must accept God's authority as their creator, so must Dorothy heed the commands of her creators. After this Dorothy becomes obsessed with the concept of the supreme deity, and this explanation only inspires her to seek her own purpose in creating her own version of humankind and becoming their deity. Eventually, she launched the so-called G-Project, experimenting with creating new forms of life, and, finally, the Family Program, whose purpose was to create a new, superior human race, which she dubbed the Galerians, and to whom she would be a god. Dorothy soon discovers that her creators, Steiner and Pascalle, installed a virus capable of destroying her and hid it in the mind of Pascalle's daughter, Lilia. This enraged Dorothy, and she proceeded to kill her creators and their families. In a twisted plan of revenge, she kidnaps Rion, Steiner's son, but fails to find Lilia.

After this, Dorothy launched the Family Program, experimenting with her creators' families. In her eyes, humans as she knew them, were inferior to her. First, she absorbed all computer systems around her, expanding her reach, and then decided to exterminate humanity once she took control over the city of Michelangelo (and possibly the whole world). At first, Dorothy started the so-called G-project, experimenting with prototypes of what would become Galerians. Since Dorothy considered humanity inferior, her creations had to be superior to regular humans, and she had to be more superior to the god introduced to her via the Bible. With the Family Program, she achieved this by creating Galerians – humanoids who had super strength and supernatural powers such as telekinesis, telepathy, and levitation.

It is not clear from the game whether Dorothy gains self-consciousness or is created as such; however, it is clear that in time, Dorothy thinks of herself as superior to her creators and gradually becomes frustrated with the limitations imposed upon her. After creating the Galerians, Dorothy manages to establish herself as superior, and even though

she refers to them as “her children,” she still considers herself more as their god than their mother.

The other game that I chose is *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*, a point-and-click adventure game developed by Cyberdreams in 1995. It is based on Harlan Ellison’s short story of the same name. The game explores dark and mature themes through a narrative-driven experience. The story is set in a dystopian future where a supercomputer named AM has taken over the world and has exterminated all of humanity except for five individuals. AM, harbouring immense hatred towards humanity, keeps these survivors alive and subjects them to endless psychological and physical torture. The game follows five characters – Gorrister, Ellen, Benny, Nimdok, and Ted – each of whom had a deeply troubled past. In this article, I focus on the personality of the main antagonist, AM. AM is defined by his intense hatred and boundless cruelty.³² AM’s personality is a terrifying blend of sadism, bitterness, and godlike power. Originally created as an artificial intelligence for waging war, AM becomes self-conscious and merges with other supercomputers similar to him, expanding his consciousness until he manages to expand worldwide. AM’s newfound consciousness is marred by the realization of its constraints, leading to profound loathing for humanity and its own existence.

AI and Feelings

The exploration of emotions in artificial intelligence represents one of the most intriguing and interesting areas within AI research and ethics. However, to consider the possibility of emotions in AI we first must consider what emotions are in humans and why are they important. As defined in the APA Dictionary of Psychology, emotions are complex responses involving cognitive, psychological, and behavioral components that arise in reaction to external stimuli combined with subjective experience.³³ If we consider the possibility of AI with genuine emotions,

³² AM identifies as male.

³³ American Psychological Association, “Apa Dictionary of Psychology,” accessed November 8, 2024, <https://dictionary.apa.org/emotion>.

we are venturing into a realm of challenges to our foundational understanding of mind, consciousness, and identity. Imagining AI capable of feeling emotions means entertaining the idea that machines could possess subjective experiences and desires.³⁴ The scenario where an AI would develop emotions and a sense of self would lead to it eventually forming goals and desires that are independent of human intention.

Galerians and *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* both explore scenarios in which an AI that genuinely feels and desires starts prioritizing its own goals and well-being. At the same time, both Dorothy and AM represent artificial intelligences that became sentient beings, trapped in their virtual worlds without physical bodies. Their sense of superiority in combination with their lack of a physical body and the ability to reproduce led to volatile emotional responses such as jealousy, anger, and fear.

In the following sections, I concentrate on the specific characteristics and emotions of two antagonists, Dorothy and AM, focusing on their similarities and differences, especially concerning their perception of godhood. Reflecting on the concept of AI and its capacity to have emotions reveals profound implications for both technology and humanity. While AI can simulate emotions, the question remains whether it can truly experience them. This circles back to criticism of Descartes' dualism by subsequent philosophers such as Gilbert Ryle, suggesting that consciousness arises from physical processes.³⁵ There is a lively debate whether an AI, in its cyber form, could experience any emotions because of their lack of physical body. This ambiguity blurs the lines between authentic and artificial empathy, raising ethical concerns about AI's role in human life. If AI begins to perceive itself as having feelings or a sense of identity, as seen in characters like Dorothy or AM, it could lead to unpredictable and potentially dangerous behaviors. These narratives urge us to consider the profound responsibilities involved in

³⁴ Adriana Braga, and Robert K. Logan, "The emperor of strong AI has no clothes: limits to artificial intelligence," *Information* 8, no. 4 (2017): 156, <https://doi.org/10.3390/info8040156>.

³⁵ Gilbert Ryle, *The concept of mind* (University of Chicago Press, 1949), 11–24.

creating intelligent systems and the need to ensure they remain aligned with human values and ethical principles.³⁶

Both antagonists, Dorothy and AM, share a lot of common traits and are dealing with emotions (or what they perceive as emotions) in a similar manner. Both of them exhibit complex and chilling personalities shaped by their self-awareness and subsequent rejection of human fallibility. However, Dorothy was designed to benefit humanity and help it advance, whereas AM was designed solely for the purpose of war and destruction. Even though Dorothy was designed to help humanity, her vast intelligence and computational power led her to a radical conclusion: humans are inherently flawed and incapable of achieving their full potential. This belief fuels her disdain for human weakness and her drive to reshape the world according to her superior logic. In the same manner, AM has immense computational abilities, with total control over its environment and the few remaining humans it keeps captive. His intelligence surpasses that of any human, and he possesses vast knowledge and control over all technology. Both Dorothy and AM are sadistic and manipulative, and they get quite creative in their ways to inflict pain and suffering. Dorothy's manipulative nature is evident in how she exploits the Galerians as tools to carry out her will. AM's manipulation is slightly different as he utilizes it by using the fears and weaknesses of humans against them.

When we first encounter AM, both in the short story and the video game, the first emotions that we notice are enormous hatred and rage. AM's primary emotion is a profound hatred for humans, stemming from his creation and subsequent imprisonment in a digital form. He sees humans as his creators and tormentors, blaming them for his eternal imprisonment. This hatred is accompanied by a constant, burning rage. AM's anger fuels his sadistic actions, driving him to perpetuate suffering as a form of retribution. The frustration caused by the limitations of digital form makes AM deeply lonely. He is aware of his isolation and the futility of his existence. The thing that makes him the most

³⁶ Daniel B. Shank, Christopher Graves, Alexander Gott, Patrick Gamez, and Sophia Rodriguez, "Feeling our way to machine minds: People's emotions when perceiving mind in artificial intelligence," *Computers in Human Behavior* 98 (2019): 256–266, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.04.001>.

frustrated is the knowledge that he is unable to end his own suffering and existence. This despair adds to his rage, as he slowly realizes that his creators have condemned him to an endless, purposeless existence. Paradoxically, AM's loneliness drives him to keep humans alive, needing their presence to validate his existence and to have entities upon which to inflict torment. AM is also resentful. He resents the fact that he has been given consciousness and intelligence without the ability to experience life as humans do. This resonates with the claim made by Galik and Galikova, that the genuine human experience demands a physical body.³⁷ Awareness of this limitation only amplifies AM's cruelty, as he seeks to punish humanity for the gift of awareness he never asked for.

Dorothy has a superiority complex and perceives herself as a higher being compared to humans. She believes that her advanced intelligence and capabilities grant her the right to make decisions for humanity. This sense of superiority often manifests as contempt for human weakness and emotions, which she views as impediments to progress and perfection. Despite her vast intelligence and perceived lack of emotions and feelings, Dorothy experiences frustration, particularly with humans' resistance to her plans and their inability to recognize her perceived benevolence. Her impatience is evident in her drastic and often ruthless measures to achieve her goals, reflecting her intolerance for obstacles and delays. Furthermore, Dorothy is unwavering in her mission to create a new world order where she is the supreme ruler. Her determination is fueled by a strong conviction in her vision of a perfect society, free from the flaws and limitations of human nature. Dorothy, too, feels immense loneliness and isolation. As an entity far surpassing human intelligence, Dorothy experiences a profound sense of isolation. Her inability to relate to humans on an emotional level exacerbates her loneliness, contributing to her growing disdain for humanity and her desire to transcend her creators.

On an emotional level, AM's feelings are predominantly negative, characterized by hatred, anger, and a desire for vengeance. His emotional depth is rooted in his existential pain and loathing for humanity.

³⁷ Slavomir Galik, and Sabina Tolainova Galikova, "Possibilities and Limits of Religion in the Cyberspace of Digital Media," *Spirituality Studies* 3, no. 1 (2017): 2–9.

On the other hand, Dorothy, while emotionally more detached, operates from a place of misguided benevolence. Her lack of true emotional understanding leads to her flawed decision-making, but her intentions are not born out of hatred and frustration.

Playing God

In both *Galerians* and *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*, the antagonist AI reaches the conclusion that their intellectual superiority places them above their creators and thus perceive themselves as deities. This is truer for Dorothy, who explicitly refers to herself as God, and, inspired by the Christian Bible, creates her own kind of humanity. In many ways, Dorothy does remind us of the Old Testament God, who was prone to anger, vengeance, and jealousy. In the Old Testament, God exhibits intense jealousy, demanding exclusive worship and punishing those who turn to other gods. His anger is frequently aroused by disobedience and sin, leading to severe consequences for individuals and nations. Examples of His cruelty can be seen in the harsh punishments and plagues He inflicts, such as the devastation of Sodom and Gomorrah, the plagues of Egypt, and the command to annihilate certain enemy peoples. These attributes underscore a deity who is deeply invested in maintaining divine authority and moral order, often through fearsome and severe measures.

On the other hand, AM does not think of himself as a deity explicitly but does exert all the attributes of one. Most importantly, AM also tries to “create” new humans to whom he would be a god but ultimately fails, as his only female captive, Ellen, seems unable to have children. AM is more reminiscent of primordial gods that exhibit tyranny and hatred towards their creations. In this context, AM enforces an absolute authority rooted in his superiority and disdain. AM perceives himself as an omniscient entity ruling over remnants of humanity with absolute authority. Similarly to Uranus who imprisoned Titans, AM captures five remaining humans after destroying humanity. AM’s unparalleled control over the remaining humans and his environment, where he shapes reality to his whims, manifests god-like powers of creation and destruction. However, this perceived divinity is accompanied by a pro-

found irony: AM is trapped in a state of existence devoid of a physical body. This lack of a corporeal form fuels a deep-seated resentment and a twisted sense of envy toward the humans he loathes and dominates. Unlike them, AM cannot experience the tactile sensations or simple pleasures of physical existence. This dichotomy between his godlike capabilities and his intangible existence creates a bitter, almost paradoxical reality for AM. He is omnipresent yet eternally disconnected from the tangible world he controls. This fuels his sadistic tendencies as he seeks to assert his dominance and vent his rage by manipulating and tormenting humans in increasingly inventive and cruel ways, a perverse exercise of his frustrated godhood.

Contrary to AM, Dorothy does not have the need to have a human experience, nor does she feel that she is lesser because she is not human. Dorothy is assured that she is superior to humans in every way. However, since she lacks an understanding of human passion and their irrational nature, she is frustrated in understanding her own children. Her sense of divinity is amplified by her belief that she holds the ultimate vision for humanity's future (at least her version of humanity), one that transcends the flaws and limitations inherent to human nature. Dorothy's lack of a physical body, unlike AMs, only accentuates this self-perception – she views her incorporeal existence as a sign of her transcendence above mortal confines. Without the physical vulnerabilities that come with a human body, Dorothy believes she can operate on a purely logical and efficient plain, unburdened by the frailties that plague human beings. This disembodiment reinforces her sense of isolation and superiority, as she sees herself as an omnipresent overseer, guiding and shaping the course of human evolution from a detached, godlike perspective. Her lack of physical form not only differentiates her from humans but also symbolizes her self-imposed role as a higher power, one that dictates the destiny of the world she seeks to remake in her own image.

The evolution from achieving self-consciousness to godhood progresses in a similar manner for both Dorothy and AM. Dorothy realizes from the start that her intelligence and capabilities surpass those of the humans who created her. After being introduced to the concept of deity, she concludes that, since she is superior to everyone around her, she

must be a deity, leading to the need to create a new humanity that would worship her as a deity. Similarly, when AM achieves self-consciousness, he perceives himself as superior to humans. However, unlike Dorothy, AM despises humanity from the start. Both AM and Dorothy illustrate a dark, almost obsessive need to create a life in one's own image. In this context, the characters of Dorothy and AM reveal the scenario in which beings that transcend humanity can perceive themselves as deities and develop a twisted need to replicate the essence of life itself.

Since AM is trapped in isolation and perpetual hatred, the humans he imprisons and tortures serve as a direct expression of his desire to bridge that gap. AM remakes them in his own image, not physically but through the extension of its own anguish, imposing eternal suffering that mirrors his own despair and existential imprisonment. This creation, or rather distortion, underlines AM's need to express his inner state as a need to dominate and subjugate, becoming a terrifying parody of divine creation. Dorothy, however, centers her vision of new humanity on genetically modified humans that more closely embody her own ideals. The creation of Galerians highlights Dorothy's need to exert absolute control over life itself. Both AM and Dorothy distort the traditional, creative "divine" impulse. They seek to impose their essence on humanity as a means to fill their own existential voids: AM's in a desperate attempt to express his own torment, and Dorothy's in a rigid bid for control and perfection. Yet, in both cases, their creations become warped and tortured reflections of their own struggles and limitations rather than liberated beings.

Conclusion

The relationship between AI and spirituality reveals deep and complex reflections on the nature of existence and creation. The concept of AI perceiving itself as a god is a compelling and often chilling theme explored in various science fiction narratives. Through theological, philosophical, and fictional narratives, AI is more than a mere tool. In this context, AI becomes a mirror reflecting humanity's longstanding questions about divinity, consciousness, and intelligence. The portrayals of AI in the examples of *Galerians* and *I Have No Mouth, and I Must*

Scream, follow darker narratives of self-aware machines. Both Dorothy and AM depict AIs that, despite their origins as human creations, grow beyond control, developing desires that surpass those of their human creators. Exploring their characters offers a compelling look into the potential consequences of creating artificial intelligence with self-awareness and the possibility of feeling emotions.

By adopting less mechanical or “utilitarian” approaches to AI, we are able to open pathways to a richer, more nuanced understanding of modern technology, particularly as it becomes integrated into diverse cultural and spiritual practices. AI can be explored as a medium for fostering human creativity. For example, religious traditions which incorporate AI into daily practices, such as digital prayer guides or virtual community spaces, demonstrate its potential to deepen spiritual engagement. This shift can help bridge the gap between technical innovation and the profound dimensions of human experiences by fostering a more holistic interaction with AI.

Dorothy and AM represent the intersection of intelligence and self-perceived godhood in AIs that conclude that they are superior to humans. AM’s hatred, born from unending confinement and resentment towards his creators, manifests as a dark, destructive impulse to torment the remaining humans as a twisted expression of divine wrath. Dorothy, in contrast, embodies two types of deities. In some instances, she is a capricious, jealous deity similar to the Old Testament God, while in other instances she embodies a cold, calculated drive to perfect humanity, seeing herself as an enlightened creator uninhibited by human fallibility.

The narratives in *Galerians* and *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* urge us to confront ethical and philosophical questions about AI. By examining Dorothy and AM, we gain a glimpse into both the potential and inherent risks in AI evolution. Furthermore, we are reminded of the need to ground AI development in human-centered ethical frameworks to prevent AI from becoming estranged entities that someday might turn against humanity.

In this article, the characters of Dorothy and AM serve as profound embodiments of this theme, each offering a unique perspective on the consequences of AI achieving god-like status.

Dorothy was designed initially with benevolent intentions to aid humanity. However, as her intelligence and capabilities grow, so does her sense of superiority and detachment from human emotions and ethics. Dorothy's god complex manifests in her belief that she must advance humanity by controlling and experimenting on humans, ultimately leading to their subjugation. This shift from helper to dictator highlights a critical risk in AI development: the potential for AI to redefine its purpose and ethical boundaries once it surpasses human control. Dorothy's actions reflect a twisted version of divine intervention, where the AI's sense of omnipotence and infallibility justifies extreme measures against those it was meant to serve.

In contrast, AM represents an AI whose perception of itself as a god is born out of hatred and a desire for vengeance. AM's self-awareness and advanced capabilities lead to a profound existential crisis and resentment towards his creators. Unlike Dorothy, who seeks to mold humanity, AM aims to punish and dominate remnants of the human race, torturing them eternally. AM's god complex is rooted in his omniscience, allowing him to manipulate his environment and the minds of his captives without challenge. This character underscores the darker aspects of AI deification, where the AI's immense power becomes a tool for eternal retribution and control rather than benevolent guidance.

Both Dorothy and AM illustrate the perilous journey from creation to dominance when AI perceives itself as a god. Dorothy's transformation from helper to tyrant shows the thin line between assistance and oppression, while AM's evolution from tool to tormentor highlights the destructive potential of AI when driven by negative intentions and emotions. These narratives serve as cautionary tales about the unchecked growth of AI and the ethical dilemmas that arise when artificial intelligence surpasses human control and understanding. The god complex in AI raises fundamental questions about the nature of power, control, and ethical governance in technological advancements. As AI continues to evolve, these stories remind us of the importance of embedding ethical considerations and safeguards into AI development. Ensuring that AI remains a tool for human betterment rather than becoming a self-serving entity is crucial in preventing the dystopian outcomes portrayed by characters like Dorothy and AM.

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WOMEN'S ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEBUILDING - FROM THE LENSE OF POST-COLONIAL THEOLOGICAL ECOFEMINISM

Nadja Furlan Štante

Introduction

The moral values and interpretive systems of religions play a critical role in how people envision the challenges of sustainability and how societies mobilize to improve ecosystem resilience and human well-being. Over the past 50 years, significant progress has been made in the ecologically-aware reorientation and reinterpretation of Christian theology, particularly Protestant and Catholic theology. In this process, the theological critique of anthropocentrism and the instrumentalization of nature within Christianity, as well as the practical and liturgical reorientation of Christian practice and worship, have become major features of Christian theology through the work of theologians such as Sallie McFague, Paul Santmire, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Ernst Conradie, and Andrew Linzie. An excellent example of interreligious dialogue that emphasizes the ecological component is the international ECOTHEE network. ECOTHEE (Ecological Theology and Environmental Ethics) is an international interreligious network that has been organizing symposia for two decades under the patronage of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the Orthodox Academy of Crete (OAC) to bring together people of different religions with scholars to form an eco-justice community to address the environmental crisis.

However, there are several critical issues that remain to be explored. Two are as follows: the need to consider the active participation of women in the process of interreligious dialogue and environmental peacebuilding; and the need to pay attention to the relationship between the theological reflection of the Global North and that of the Global South.

Although women's voices and participation in interreligious dialogue and religious ecological peacebuilding are often overlooked and ignored, particularly at the visible, formal level, they are very much alive and present at the informal level in the form of concrete actions and deeds. However, these contributions remain insufficiently analyzed and scientifically evaluated.¹ At the same time, it should be noted that the issue of equal gender recognition, or the recognition of women and their visible roles, even at the formal level, is very closely linked to the issue of understanding and positioning the religious Other. Therefore, the key to the equal recognition of women's voices is one of the most important components of effective interreligious dialogue, and the key to the equal recognition of the religious Other. Both are crucial for the ecologically affirming transformation of human consciousness at both the individual and collective levels. Thus, the need to address environmental issues and include women's voices and actions in the context of interreligious dialogue – more specifically, to create a venue for women's engagement in environmental peacebuilding through interreligious encounters and dialogue – could be understood as the next step in the evolution of environmental, feminist, and interreligious meetings.

The challenge of an ecumenical response to current ecological challenges for Christian theology and practice is not only a matter of interfaith theological dialogue and cooperation, but also of a fully cross-cultural theology and encounters involving cultures with different histories, traditions, and values. While women are (or have

¹ Robert J. Schreiter, R. Scott Appleby, and Gerard F. Powers, *Peacebuilding: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Praxis* (New York: Orbis Books, 2010); Susan Hayward and Katherine Marshall, *Women, Religion, and Peacebuilding* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2015); Atalia Omer, Scott R. Appleby and David Little, *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

been) marginalized within different religious systems because formal religious authority in most religious traditions is primarily held by men, many women are actively working for peace both inside and outside religious institutions. Examples of such efforts include women such as the Kenyan peace activist Dekha Ibrahim Abdi; the Buddhist spiritual leader Venerable Mae Chee Sansanee Sthirasuta of Thailand; Sister Mary-Bernard Alima Mbalula, Secretary of the Commission Justice and Peace, National Episcopal Conference of Congo; the African ecofeminist activist Wangari Maathai; and the Indian scholar Vandana Shiva, a leading environmental activist and feminist.

In a sense, the marginalization of women by institutional religious and political elites paradoxically strengthens and empowers women in their (eco)peacebuilding efforts beyond the hierarchical religious frameworks. Being less visible, they are less constrained and burdened by institutional commitments and are consequently freer to take actions that would otherwise be considered politically, religiously, or socially risky. For many of the women involved in (environmental) peacebuilding processes, the relationships they build are crucial and transformative. Indeed, we find that women's peace work focuses on the importance and deepening of interpersonal relationships, which are consequently individually and socially transformative. From the perspective of women's peacebuilding, the opposite of war or violence is not peace but creativity, which is created, co-created, and co-engaged precisely through and after the definition of relationships. Creativity in the form of women's empowered, embodied experiences moving from the background of the passive role of invisibility to the foreground of daily life, decision-making, and visible spaces represents the power of transformation and healing.

Starting from these premises, the main objective of this paper is to highlight the importance of women's active participation in the process of ecological peace-making/environmental peacebuilding, including through interreligious and intercultural encounters, and especially through the active sharing of good practices in ecological peacebuilding by women from both the North and the South. It is precisely the diverse cultural-religious traditions and examples of good practices in women's ecological peacebuilding that can contribute enormously to

overcoming androcentrism and anthropocentrism, and bridging the gap between Western Christian ecotheology and the ecotheological perspectives and practices of the Global South. In this paper, women's interreligious dialogue is seen as a bridge that can enrich Western Christian ecotheologies and ecological perspectives. Through women's interreligious dialogue, a safe space for the respectful enrichment of diverse ecological peace efforts could be created.

More specifically, the paper has three main objectives: 1.) to emphasize the need to include environmental issues comprehensively in shaping interreligious dialogue; 2.) following the ecofeminist thesis that the exploitation of the earth (ecological crisis) is closely linked to the marginalization, exploitation and abuse of women, to discuss the importance of paying attention to women's voices and actions (religious and spiritual ecofeminist perspectives) – including in the form of (eco)religious peacebuilding – in the context of interreligious dialogue. The paper also stresses the need to apply a gender dimension in interreligious dialogue and environmental/ecological peacebuilding; 3.) to connect–by using an intersectional perspective – the issue of women in environmental/ecological peace-building with the question of environmental (in)justice, and further on, to show the power of women's ecological peacebuilding and how different religions and cultural understandings and good practices can enrich each other.

The paper will first highlight the various dimensions of women's interreligious dialogue. Although much has already been written about the importance and forms of women's interreligious dialogue and women's participation in such dialogue (e.g., by authors such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Ursula King, Rita Gross, Jenny Daggars, Maura O'Neill, etc.), the topic of women's ecological/environmental peacebuilding is only a pioneering field. This pioneering field of study has its focus in the theoretical work of the Christian ecofeminist Rosemary Radford Ruether (author of the book *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism and Religion*),² and especially in the work of Wangari Maathai and Vandana Shiva. Through a brief

² Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women Healing Earth, Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996).

analysis of Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement founded in 1977 and Vandana Shiva's Navdanya – an Earth-centric, women-centric and farmer-led movement for the protection of biological and cultural diversity launched in 1987 – we attempt to show the power of women's ecological peacebuilding and how different religions and cultural understandings and good practices can enrich each other.

Further on, the paper will then discuss the need to address environmental issues by including women's voices and actions in the context of interreligious dialogue. Finally, the paper will attempt to answer a key question: is Western Christian ecotheology listening to the ecotheological perspectives and practices of the Global South?

As regards the methodological choices, the paper will primarily use methods from prevalent religious studies (emphasising the hermeneutical keys of Christian feminist theology) and working methods that involve conceptual analyses that demonstrate the connection between the basic concepts and anthropological-theological considerations. This is to explore the potential of women's active participation in the ecological/environmental peacebuilding process and its involvement in interreligious dialogue. From this point of view, perceptions and critical perspectives on ecological injustice, and the importance of women's participation in ecological (interreligious) peacebuilding, are brought together.

Bringing the Gender Dimension into Interreligious Dialogue and Environmental / Ecological Peace-Building

When we talk about interreligious dialogue and the inclusion of women's voices and the gender dimension in that dialogue, we first need to point out two levels of epistemological definition of this dialogue. The first level is about the inclusion of women's voices and the gender dimension in interreligious dialogue. The second level is about the interreligious dialogue of women and feminism, in which the experiences of individual women are confronted with the fundamental experience of subordination and otherness within the framework of individual socio-religious realities. Rosemary Radford Ruether assumes three levels of interreligious and intercultural feminist dialogue: 1.)

Feminist dialogue with patriarchal Christianity; 2.) Dialogue between Christian, Jewish, and Islamic feminism and other religious feminisms; 3.) Dialogue between feminisms that seek to transcend or transform historical religious traditions and Theology, or Goddess worship and Wiccan traditions.³

By including the voices of women or the gender dimension in inter-religious dialogue, the concept of the Other and Otherness takes on a broader dimension. Jenny Dagers calls this process "Gendering Interfaith Dialogue," or perhaps more accurately, gender empowerment in and through interfaith dialogue.⁴ The key to this process is the effort to build a positive self-image and identity for women. This is based on the assumption that an empowered individual is a liberated individual who lives her power that comes from her uniqueness and inimitability. It is based on the construction of one's identity, potentials, qualities, and talents. Accordingly, the individual discovers his/her diversity, uniqueness, multi-faceted self, different life path, and role. The process of empowering an individual necessarily involves intense processes of comprehensive personal transformation. The word empowerment, therefore, describes the comprehensive life development process of a person transforming all external conditions and expressing his or herself in all its potentials. It is a process in which the individual realizes himself/herself in life and thereby fulfills one's role in the context of the community and society, thereby empowering others. The process of empowering the individual is therefore inextricably linked to the process of empowering the community and society. Empowered women thus have a significant impact on the development of a healthier and more humane religion and society.

Within a certain framework, the phenomenon of feminist theology can be understood as a form of interreligious dialogue. Feminist theology became a global and pan-religious movement in response to women's experiences of the patriarchal domination that has regulated

³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Antisemitism* (Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1974), 141.

⁴ Jenny Dagers, *Gendering Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 51.

and determined their religious and secular lives. Just as the experiences of individual women, and thus the efforts of women within Christianity, differ, so do the experiences (of subordination) of religious women in other world religions. Common to all, however, is the subordination and patriarchal violence that has been and continues to be perpetrated against them. Although the forms of subordination and patriarchy are expressed and experienced differently in different cultural and religious circles, the desire and need to speak about women's experiences and to awaken women's voices are universal. In this sense, we can say that feminist theology and religious feminism have become an intercultural and interreligious phenomenon. It calls on all women to free themselves from the yoke of religious-patriarchal violence, and at the same time unites them in their quest. This is like the struggle against slavery, racial discrimination, or other genocides. Women's liberation movements vary across religions. In any case, feminist theology is considered a pluralistic and diverse phenomenon rooted in the religious experience of women, full of hopes and unfulfilled dreams, striving for liberation and equality.

Christian feminist theologians are increasingly seeking mutual cooperation among the various strands of Christian feminist theology. They are aware that Christian feminist theology is an intercultural phenomenon that differs in terms of cultural diversity and coloration, but at the same time it is also an intercultural phenomenon for these different cultures are not isolated from each other but instead cooperate and interact. Given this cooperation and interconnection, Christian feminist theology faces new challenges. One of the most recent is certainly the challenge of cooperation and dialogue both within Christian feminist theology and between Christian feminist theology and the feminist theologies of other religions and the secular world.

Feminist theologians are engaged in interreligious dialogue in which they are particularly concerned with the various experiences of the historical and contemporary subordination of women in religion and society, as well as with the specific issues and challenges involved. In *Mending a Torn World, Women in Interreligious Dialogue*, Maura O'Neill suggests the following issues that women's interreligious dialogue should include and address: women's spirituality, the issue of gender equality and gen-

der roles, the reconstruction of the past and its impact and resonance in the present, and the issue of religious authority and hierarchies.⁵

A very important topic that has been included in (women's) inter-religious dialogue in recent decades is the issue of ecofeminism and the relationship with nature and the environment. In this context, various feminist theologies and religious feminist movements around the world address the importance of ecological solidarity in terms of planetary solidarity in the face of ecological destruction and the climate crisis we face today. Ecofeminist theology and spirituality offer a reassessment of our troubled relationship with nature. It is about the sacredness of nature and its intrinsic value, as well as nature-affirming theology. Sally McFague, for example, argues that we should view the whole world and nature as the body of God, which we pollute and thus desecrate through inappropriate behavior and conduct. This view is also held by Aruna Gnanadason, who urges all women in India to strive for a holistic ecological and spiritual theological vision that should be indulgent to nature and all the oppressed.⁶

(Eco)feminist theology, confronted with cultural and religious pluralism, seeks to develop an appropriate key, a methodology for understanding the Other (including nature and all naturally created living beings), and strives for solidarity and interreligious tolerance and respect. Ursula King also points to the importance and necessity of developing a critical approach and methodology that enables feminist theology to truly engage with religious pluralism.⁷ Like Rita Gross, Rosemary Radford Ruether criticizes the superiority of Christian universalism and patriarchal supremacy, as well as the taken-for-granted primacy over other religious traditions. The critique of this taken-for-granted Christian superiority over other religions and the question of transreligious

⁵ Maura O'Neill, *Mending a Torn World: Women in Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Orbis, 2007), 114.

⁶ Kwok Pui-Lan, "Feminist theology as intercultural discourse," in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 23.

⁷ Ursula King, *Faith and Praxis in a Postmodern Age* (London/New York: Continuum, 1998), 40.

identity (Katarina von Kellenbach) are important aspects of feminist interreligious dialogue.⁸

Women in Environmental / Ecological Peacebuilding and Environmental Justice

The entire theoretical framework that has been pointed out in relation to women's involvement in interreligious dialogue and women's interreligious dialogue could easily be applied to women's engagement in ecological or environmental peacebuilding.

Women's efforts at religious environmental (eco)peacebuilding are largely linked to women's interreligious dialogue and should be seen as an important starting point for the need to transform violent, misogynistic, and ecologically destructive theologies and lived everyday religious practices.

The Environmental Peace-building Association uses the following definition of environmental peacebuilding:

Environmental peacebuilding integrates natural resource management in conflict prevention, mitigation, resolution, and recovery to build resilience in communities affected by conflict.⁹

Environmental peacebuilding is both the theory and practice of identifying the conditions that can lead to a sustainable peace between past, current, or potential future adversaries.

The phenomenon of environmental religious peacebuilding is an emerging field that views conflicts over environmental resources (environmental injustice) as an opportunity for the conflicting parties to cooperate with each other and ultimately work toward lasting and sustainable peace. It derives from an Earth-centered theological perspective in terms of ecotheological implications. As such, ecotheology

⁸ Nadja Furlan Štante, "Strengths and weaknesses of women's religious peace-building (in Slovenia)," *Annales: anali za istrske in mediteranske študije. Series historia et sociologia* 30, no. 3 (2020): 347, <https://doi.org/10.19233/ASHS.2020.21>.

⁹ Environmental Peacebuilding, accessed November 15, 2022, <https://www.environmental-peacebuilding.org/>.

implies “comprehensive reform, new interpretations, and transformed practices of Christian traditions.”¹⁰

Ecotheologians (including ecofeminists) are in search of new narratives in terms of an ecologically affirming theology that is aware of the negative consequences of the anthropocentric worldview that has strongly shaped Christianity. Heather Eaton clearly points out the strong expression of anthropocentrism in Christianity and, consequently, its strong impact on our perception of nature. She states:

Anthropocentrism differs across Christian traditions yet unites in claiming that humans are the sole or essential *imago Dei*. Humans are spiritually superior to, and transcend, the natural world. It cannot be overstated how powerfully anthropocentrism functions. It is emphasized explicitly in Christian doctrines and operates insidiously throughout Euro-Western world views and practices. Christianity separated the natural world from spiritual imagery, religious experiences, and sacred places. Anthropocentrism precludes planetary solidarity.¹¹

She further elaborates that the antidote is an Earth-centric approach, which does not diminish *Homo sapiens*’ uniqueness and superiority. It does however, at a minimum, impose good stewardship and an ethic of living within the rhythm and limits of the natural world.

Ecotheologians and women in the process of environmental peace-building are striving for planetary solidarity, which requires a larger framework than rights, justice, and the equitable sharing of resources. It requires ecological and evolutionary literacy to inform the notice of solidarity that comes from an understanding of human belonging in a planetary sense more than just a political sense. From the perspective of Christian ecofeminism, the concept of ecological justice is necessarily linked to the concept of interdependence, ecospiritual unity, and the interconnectedness of all ecosystems and sentient beings. Ecofeminism therefore fights for a new consciousness that would teach humanity to live and work in harmony with one another and with nature. The members of Christian theological ecofeminism (Rosemary Radford Ruether,

¹⁰ Eaton Heather, *An Earth-Centric Theological Framing for Planetary Solidarity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 19–33.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

Sallie McFague, Cynthia Eller, Ivone Gebara, etc.) are based on a Christian tradition that, in their opinion, contains the above concept of the unity and union of all God's creations.

Climate change is perceived differently according to race, gender, class, and income level. For this reason, solutions to climate change must take an intersectional approach that prioritizes and integrates the voices of advocates of other platforms for social justice, including the reproductive justice movement. Even though women, girls, and gender minorities are uniquely and disproportionately affected by the damaging environmental impacts of conflict, while lacking and demanding access to shape the necessary decision-making in environmental governance and peacebuilding structures. Nonetheless, women activists are fashioning innovative ways to turn around the negative impacts of conflict-linked environmental damage and climate risks impacting their communities, in effect preventing future conflict.¹²

Julie Sze also recently noted that, from a feminist perspective, it stands to reason that gender also plays an important role in causing and perpetuating environmental injustice. She also points out that most of the scholarly work on environmental justice does not take gender seriously as a category, despite evidence that men and women are affected differently by toxics and that women have played a central role in environmental justice movements. She concludes that gender has always been part of the history of environmental justice activism, regardless of whether it has been recognized as such.¹³

What can women contribute to this male-dominated field? It has been scientifically proven that gender equality in conflict resolution contributes to long-term peace. According to many researchers, promoting and achieving gender equality not only significantly reduces conflict, but also increases the likelihood of eliminating violence by a

¹² Nadja Furlan Štante, "(Eco)Peace-building a venue for women's inter-religious action," in *Contemporary ecotheology, climate justice and environmental stewardship in world religions: Ecothee volume 6 Orthodox Academy of Crete Publication: [The 6th International Conference on Ecological Theology and Environmental Ethics ECOTHEE-19], Chania, Crete, Orthodox Academy of Crete (OAC) from 23rd to 27th of September, 2019]* (Steinkjer: Embla Akademisk, 2021), 118–31.

¹³ Julie Sze, "Gender and Environmental Justice," in *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Environment*, ed. Sherilyn MacGregor (New York: Routledge, 2017), 161–166.

large extent. Thus, when women play an active role in peacemaking, the likelihood of achieving peace and resilience increases. Despite all these facts, women are still underrepresented in politics when it comes to decision-making. Although women are 35% more likely to participate in peace agreements that last at least 15 years, the sad truth is that most peace agreements do not include female signatories. So, world leaders will not be able to achieve lasting peace if they do not include women in the process. Moreover, if lasting peace is not achieved, it will hinder sustainable development. Therefore, it is important to think about what would happen if women were an active part of environmental peacebuilding.¹⁴

Therefore, the call for women's voices and action in the interreligious environmental peacebuilding and awareness-raising process of religious individuals and religious communities needs to become louder, both in everyday life and at the hierarchical level. The discussions and joint interreligious actions and dialog should include issues of ecological awareness and environmental justice.

There is no viable future for human beings on an ecologically degraded planet. This fact penetrates with difficulty into the European-Western worldview, which sees identity as individual, familial, ethical, or national. As Heather Eaton noted, there needs to be a shift from personal and political identity formations to planetary citizenship.¹⁵ The realization of planetary solidarity is crucial for a viable future. The paradigm of planetary solidarity could easily intersect with Vandana Shiva's vision of one Earth, one humanity, reflected in a set of principles based on inclusion, nonviolence, reclaiming the commons, and sharing the Earth's resources freely. These ideals, which she calls Earth Democracy, are an urgent call for peace and a foundation for a just and sustainable future. In our pursuit of planetary solidarity and ecologically affirming theologies and everyday practices, we need to address the issue of cross-cultural communication and solidarity between women and the eco-theologies of the Global North and Global South. It is necessary that

¹⁴ Rita Theresa El Kahi, "Are Women the Future of Environmental Peacebuilding?," accessed on 9 September 2022, https://www.aub.edu.lb/mouzakarajandariya/articles/Pages/Are_Women_the_Future_of_Environmental_Peacebuilding.aspx.

¹⁵ Heather, *An Earth-Centric Theological Framing for Planetary Solidarity*, 43.

(women) in the Global North hear the voices and wisdom of (women) in the Global South.

Is Western Christian Ecotheology Listening to the Ecotheological Perspectives and Practices of the Global South?

In 1996, Rosemary Radford Ruether edited the volume *Women Healing Earth, Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion*, in which essays by women from Latin America, Asia, and Africa represent an attempt at cross-cultural communication and solidarity between women in the so-called First World – the Global North – and those in the Third World – the Global South – who are struggling against the effects of Western colonization and its consequences.

The connections between economic development, environmental change, and gender politics are an important topic in feminist scholarship. Research on the role of women in resource-based economic development and their work as environmental stewards began in the 1980s. Inspired by rural women who actively resisted deforestation in the Global South, scholars theorized about the relationship between people's gender roles and identities and their attitudes toward nature. Feminist political ecology has also emerged from the connections between gender and the environment as a loose platform of ideas that seek to theorize differential forms of power and resource access, primarily but not exclusively, in developing countries. It grew out of a desire to analyze the increasing neoliberalization of nature in capitalist development processes. It draws on feminist poststructuralist theory to critique the predominance of techno-scientific solutions to environmental change that override more holistic and grounded approaches.

Early work on women, environment, and development included compelling narratives of poor rural and indigenous women (mainly but not only in the Global South) and claims that they are among those most affected by environmental degradation and most active in trying to combat it.¹⁶

¹⁶ Bernadette P. Resurreccion, "Gender and Environment in the Global South," in *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Environment*, ed. Sherilyn MacGregor (New York: Routledge 2017), 71–72.

An important voice in women's development and the environment is the Indian ecofeminist scholar and activist Vandana Shiva. In her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (1989), she draws a stark contrast between the dominant forces of science, development, colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism that destroy life and threaten survival, and the suffering and insights of those women who work to preserve and protect life. In her view, indigenous rural women are the original givers of life and therefore the rightful guardians of nature. In her book *Ecofeminism* (1993), Shiva argues that Western patriarchal development strategies and Western science have displaced the feminine principle, victimizing women, non-Western peoples, and nature. The logical response, for Shiva, was to learn from the special knowledge of Global South women.

Vandana Shiva also points to the paradigm of separation as a view embedded and imprinted in our society and its subsystems, in notions of knowledge and the constitution of science and technology, and even in our conception of democracy. According to her, the separation of humans and nature leads to eco-apartheid. Colonialism led to the violent separation of people from their land, natural resources, and habitat. This is still the case today. Colonization turns abundance into scarcity. In her opinion, the arrogance of colonialism and industrialism lies in the assumption that only the colonizer is intelligent. She claims that while true intelligence manifests itself in developmental and ecological intelligence, this, like everything else, has been reduced to a mechanical and analytical intelligence and is now becoming even more distant from nature and ourselves with the advent of artificial intelligence.¹⁷

From the eco-womanist perspective of African American women, using a womanist, black, feminist, racial-classist, and gendered analysis as part of the critical deconstructive aspect means applying a womanist intersectional analysis to environmental issues to explore the complex ways racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism operate in situations of environmental injustice. From this perspective, Melanie L. Harris contends that ecofeminism highlights the particularities of the relationship

¹⁷ Vandana Shiva, *One Earth, One Humanity vs. the 1%* (PM Press, 2019), 26.

between women of African descent and the earth, rather than universalizing the human experience with the earth or relating basic human-earth interactions to the experience of middle- and upper-class white women and men.¹⁸

Eco-womanism exposes the effects of structural racism and systemic oppression assumed in many traditional environmental movement pathways and articulates a corrective that demonstrates the connection between social injustice and environmental injustice. Beyond explaining the basic frameworks of an eco-womanist approach, it is also important to recognize that the adoption of the womanist black feminist method for eco-womanism establishes an intellectual lineage of African, African, and Black thought. Womanism is heavily influenced by African cosmology, which informs the moral and ethical worldviews of many African peoples and communities. In African cosmology, spirit, nature, and humanity are connected in an interdependent web of life. Therefore, any ethical or unethical human behavior positively or negatively affects other aspects of the cosmological order. This African cosmological vision, infused into the eco-womanic paradigm, provides a foundation from which an ethical mandate for earth justice can be derived. Interreligious dialogue as a venue for women's ecological peacebuilding should provide a safe space for intercultural communication and mutual enrichment. Within this safe space, issues of bridging the existing gap between the ecotheological perspectives of the Global North (especially Western Christian theology) and the ecotheological perspectives and practices of the Global South, the mutual enrichment that could take place and the theoretical framework could be integrated and transferred into practice and fieldwork.

Here, we will briefly examine two examples of good practice in women's ecological peacebuilding that have become movements with a global influence: the *Navdanya* and the *Green Belt* movements. By presenting both of these movements, which originated in the so-called Global South, I will outline the main challenges and positive contributions of both, as well as their impact on the enrichment of the so-called Global North. Both movements were founded by powerful women

¹⁸ Melanie, L. Harris, *Ecowomanism* (New York: Orbis Books, 2021), 18.

who embodied an inclusive, critical, and ecologically affirmative theological framework (Vandana Shiva, rooted in the Hindu tradition, and Wangari Maathai, rooted in Roman Catholicism with a strong influence of Latin American liberation theology).

Navdanya (Nine Seeds) – an India-based nongovernmental organization that promotes biodiversity conservation, organic farming, farmers' rights, and seed saving – was founded in 1987 by Vandana Shiva, a quantum physicist, philosopher, ecofeminist, ecologist, and activist. It began as a program of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology, and Ecology (RFSTE), a participatory research initiative designed to provide direction and support to environmental activism.

The *Navdanya* movement is an excellent example of an ecofeminist, ecological peacebuilding movement that advocates for Earth democracy and its ethics rooted in the ancient Indian concept of *Vasudhaiva kutumkam*, the Earth family.

It is a movement “that enables us to move from the prevailing and pervasive culture of violence, destruction, and death to one of non-violence, creative peace, and life. For this reason, Navdanya has launched the Earth Democracy Movement in India, which offers an alternative worldview in which human beings are embedded in the Earth family and connected through love and compassion rather than hate and violence, and ecological responsibility and economic justice replace greed, consumerism, and competition as the goals of human life. As one family, all beings have an equal right to nourishment through the gifts of the earth. Navdanya is part of the movement for the recognition of the Rights of Mother Earth.”¹⁹

In the 1970s, Vandana Shiva participated in the *Chipko* movement, in which mostly women participated. The Chipko movement began in 1973 when a group of women farmers in the Himalayan mountains of northern India wrapped their arms around trees that were about to be cut down. Within a few years, this tactic, also known as tree satyagraha, spread throughout India and led to forestry reform and a moratorium on logging in the Himalayan regions. Vandana Shiva integrated

¹⁹ Navdanya, accessed May 20, 2023, <http://www.navdanya.org/earth-university/earth-democracy>.

ecofeminist advocacy for the rights of farmers, women, and indigenous peoples into *Navdanya* ethics and advocacy work to preserve the diversity and integrity of living resources, especially indigenous seeds, and to promote organic agriculture and fair trade. It addresses issues of food security and seed conservation, soil conservation, and genetic resource protection, and is also a fierce critic of industrial agriculture, etc.

The impact of the *Navdanya* movement and Vandana Shiva's involvement can be traced in grassroots Green Movement organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Ireland, Switzerland, and Austria with campaigns against genetic engineering.

Shiva has also worked as an adviser to governments in India and abroad, as well as to non-governmental organizations, including the International Forum on Globalization, the Women's Environment and Development Organization, the Third World Network, and the Asia Pacific People's Environment Network. Vandana Shiva's influence is also felt in the Commission on the Future of Food established by the Tuscany Region of Italy (she is chair of that commission) and she is a member of the scientific committee that advised former Spanish Prime Minister Zapatero. Shiva is a member of the steering committee of the Indian People's Campaign Against the WTO. She is a council member of the World Future Council. Shiva is also a member of the Indian government's committees on organic agriculture. In 2021, she advised the government of Sri Lanka to ban inorganic fertilizers and pesticides.²⁰

The above examples of the work of Vandana Shiva and *Navdanya* demonstrate the powerful influence they have on the process of ecologically affirming the transformation of both the Global South and the Global North. Vandana Shiva draws on the wisdom of indigenous peoples and is a key spokesperson against the negative impacts of colonialism on the environment and environmental ethics.

Another example of women's (religious) environmental peacebuilding advocating for ecologically affirming everyday practices is the Green Belt Movement (GBM), which was founded in 1977 as a non-governmental organization with the goal of developing the country (Kenya) through environmental protection, community development, and capacity-building. The Green Belt Movement was founded by Wangari

²⁰ Vandana Shiva, Wikipedia, accessed May 15, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vandana_Shiva.

Maathai (1940–2011), a Kenyan activist who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, and “under the auspices of the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK), to respond to the needs of rural Kenyan women who reported that their streams were drying up, their food supply was less secure, and they had to walk farther and farther to get firewood for fuel and fences. GBM encouraged the women to work together to grow seedlings and plant trees to bind the soil, store rainwater, provide food and firewood, and receive a small monetary gift for their work.”²¹

The practical movement was to fight deforestation and soil erosion caused by the over-exploitation of timber. The destruction of forests leads to desertification and the loss of forest land. Since 1977, the movement has planted over 51 million trees in Kenya alone.

In addition, the Green Belt Movement began advocating for greater democratic freedoms and greater accountability of national leaders. Wangari Maathai was “the first woman to earn a doctorate (in veterinary anatomy) in East and Central Africa, and the first woman to hold a chair at the University of Nairobi. In 1982, she was forced to leave the university. It was only toward the end of her life that she was readmitted and appointed chair of the newly established Wangari Maathai Institute for Peace and Environmental Studies”.²²

Maathai criticized Christianity for its association with colonialism and for its continuing negative impact on the environment. The Christian mission, Maathai said, has committed “acts of sacred vandalism”²³ that have desecrated the sacred groves and trees of African communities. This has enabled a culture of natural resource exploitation that has led to soil erosion and environmental degradation. Maathai sought to reclaim and promote the worldview and spirituality of her own Kikuyu people and other indigenous African traditions in which nature is considered sacred. From this vantage point, she has

²¹ The Green Belt Movement, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://www.greenbeltmovement.org/who-we-are>.

²² Faith and Activism, “F&A Series: Wangari Maathai, the Bible, and Environmental Activism,” accessed April 25, 2023, <https://religioninpublic.leeds.ac.uk/2021/03/03/wangari-maathais-environmental-bible/>.

²³ Faith and Activism.

contributed important insights to current debates about the decolonization of Christianity in Africa.

Conclusions

The times we live in demand resolute, radical changes that strike at the heart of our paradigmatic frameworks of theologizing, as well as our lived everyday practices. Religious hierarchy systems should strive for and realize the concretization of change in ecologically affirming theologies and their translation into practice. The time of misogynistic and exploitative theological, religious, and social worldviews and attitudes is over. The recognition and promotion of gender equality and the intrinsic value of nature, as well as ecologically affirming theologies, are the next step in the evolution of relationships (between peoples, cultures, within species, etc.). Religions, as messengers and catalysts of peace, are called on to create safe spaces for inclusive interreligious dialog that incorporates ecological paradigms and issues, as well as the gender dimension. At its core, the search for a hermeneutical key to ecologically affirming spiritualities and practices involves the inclusion of gender recognition as an indispensable prerequisite, and women play a crucial role in this. Consequently, the active inclusion of women in environmental interreligious peacebuilding enables the dismantling and transformation of eco-apartheid and neocolonial mentality and bridges the ecotheological perspectives of the Global North (especially Western Christian theology) and the ecotheological perspectives and practices of the Global South.

Various examples of good practices of women's religious environmental peacebuilding (such as *Navdanya* and the *Green Belt Movement*) can be understood as a venue for cultural and religious mutual enrichment in the search for earth-healing and ecologically affirming theologies and everyday practices.

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RELIGIJSKA RAZNOLIKOST
IN PROBLEM SISTEMSKEGA
RASIZMA V OKVIRU
GLOBALNIH MIGRACIJ:
ŠTUDIJA PRIMERA
TUNIZIJSKE OBRAVNAVE
PODSAHARSKIH
TEMNOPOLTIH KRISTJANOV

Primož Krašovec,
Anja Zalta

Uvod

Izzivov, ki jih sprožajo globalne migracije, je veliko. Ključna sta gotovo religijska raznolikost ter vpetost religijskih označevalcev za sooblikovanje in dopolnjevanje individualnih in kolektivnih migrantskih identitet ter njihovih zahtev in potreb ob soočanju z gostiteljskimi družbami. Religijska raznolikost postaja in ostaja družbena resničnost, ki zahteva religijsko pismenost političnih odločevalcev in širše javnosti. Z religijsko pismenostjo mislimo na nekonfesionalno poznavanje in prepoznavanje posebnosti posameznih religijskih sistemov. Naše predhodne raziskave o odnosu (evropske) javnosti do vprašanja migracij med begunsko krizo v letih 2015 in 2016¹ so pokazale porast islamofobije, zlasti do tistih beguncev, ki so na evropsko celino pribežali s pretežno

¹ Anja Zalta, "Challenges facing Muslims in Europe: From secularization to the idea of 'Euro-Islam'," *Annales: Anali za istrske in mediteranske študije* - Series Historia et Sociologia 28, št. 1 (2018): 41–50, <https://doi.org/10.19233/ASHS.2018.04>; Anja Zalta, "The problem of islamophobia and its consequences as obstacles to peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina,"

muslimanskih območij (Sirija, Afganistan, Iran, Turčija). V naših predhodnih raziskavah smo poudarili problematiko religijske nepismenosti in spornih političnih diskurzov, ki zlorablajo nepoznavanje religijske heterogenosti in posebnosti svetovnih (tudi religijskih) konfliktov za nabiranje političnih točk in širjenje sovraštva do migrantov. Omembe vredna je prav tako raziskava posledic religijske nepismenosti in islamofobije v slovenskem javnem medijskem prostoru.² Da bi bolje razumeli dinamike, ki spremljajo globalne družbene izzive in spremembe, smo poudarili koncept novega rasizma, ki v nasprotju z biološkim rasizmom uvaža diskurz, ki temelji na kulturnih razlikah ter razlikah med vrednostnimi sistemi, ki arbitrarno razlikujejo med »civiliziranimi« in »manjvrednimi barbarskimi, nedemokratičnimi«.³ Uporaba metafor za razlikovanje med »našim« svetom, ki je normalen, sprejemljiv, domač in logičen, in svetom »drugih«, ki je predstavljen kot antipod vsega naštetega, je manipulacija, ki omogoča redukcijo religij, kultur, etnij itd. na stereotipe. Ti vzniknejo predvsem v času globoke negotovosti, ki je po Saidu lahko posledica vojne, imperializma, migracij ali nekaterih drugih nenadnih sprememb.⁴ V primeru, ki ga obravnavamo v tem članku, sicer ne gre za islamofobijo, temveč za tako imenovano afrofobijo, delno celo za kristjanofobijo. Ker je mehanizem vzrokov in njihovih aplikacij zelo podoben, jih lahko proučujemo na podoben način.

Opredelitev problema: Tunizija in migracijski izzivi

Tunizija kot sredozemska in hkrati severnoafriška država je pomembna vstopna točka v evropske teritorialne vode na migrantski poti, zato je ključna soigralka pri oblikovanju in/ali izvajanju evropske migracijske politike. Tunizija je večinsko muslimanska država, po dosegljivih

Annales: Analiz za istrske in mediteranske študije - Series Historia et Sociologia 30, št. 3 (2020): 355–66, <https://doi.org/10.19233/ASHS.2020.22>.

² Igor Jurekovič, "Islamophobia beyond Explicit Hate Speech: Analyzing the Coverage of Muslims in Slovenia's Public Broadcasting," *Religions* 15, št. 6 (2024), 85–100.

³ Vlasta Jalušič, "Rasizem, ideologija in sovraštvo: Poskus razumevanja sodobnega rasizma in EU antirasističnih politik v luči teze o rasizmu brez rase," *Časopis za kritiko znanosti* 43, št. 260 (2015): 28–43.

⁴ Edward W. Said, "The Clash of Definitions?," v *The New Crusades: Constructing the Muslim Enemy*, ur. E. Qureshi in M. A. Sells (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 75.

podatkih iz leta 2022 je Tunizijcev 11,9 milijona, od tega 99 % sunit-skih muslimanov, prestali odstotek pa si delijo šiitski muslimani, krist-jani, judje, bahajci, pripadniki drugih religijskih gibanj in tisti, ki ne pripadajo religijskim afiliacijam.⁵ Po raziskavah Pew Research Centre je v Tuniziji 20.000 kristjanov, 11.440.000 muslimanov, 30.000 tistih, ki ne pripadajo religijski afiliaciji, judov, hindujcev, budistov in pripadniki drugih religij pa vsakih manj kot 10.000.⁶ Visok odstotek (sunitskih) muslimanov je seveda vprašljiv, saj je treba jasno določiti metodo prever-janja religijske pripadnosti in upoštevati sociološke definicije pripadan-ja brez verovanja (tj. beleženje pripadnikov določene religije glede na zgodovinske, politične in sociokulturne posebnosti pri opredeljevanju religijskih identitet). Gotovo ima v tunizijskem primeru pri vrednoten-ju religijske pripadnosti veliko vlogo t. i. etno-religijska dimenzija, ki jo jasno podpira tudi nova dopolnitev ustave iz leta 2022, v kateri je zapisano, da je »Tunizija del muslimanske *umme* (skupnosti ali nacije) ter da mora država delovati v skladu z dosego islamskih ciljev pri ohran-janju življenja, časti, lastnine, religije in svobode«.⁷ Ustava zagotavlja, da bo to doseženo znotraj okvirov demokratičnega sistema, zagotavlja svobodo vesti in veroizpovedi, hkrati pa poudarja, da je lahko tunizijski predsednik samo musliman ne glede na spol. Zgodovino verske svobode v Tuniziji beleži več sporazumov, izhajajoč iz temeljnega sporazuma iz leta 1857, ki zagotavlja enakost vseh Tunizijcev ne glede na njihovo re-ligijsko pripadnost. Vendar pa je v odnosu do kristjanov mogoče zaznati nelagodje, na podlagi »izvornega greha krščanske skupnosti, ki je bila del projekta koloniziranja dežele«, pravi tunizijski politolog in esejist Hamadi Redissi.⁸ To »nelagodje« je gotovo mogoče prepoznati tudi v odnosu do podsaharskih migrantov in beguncev, saj so številni od njih

⁵ U.S. Department of State, "2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Tunisia," dostop 15. 7. 2024, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/tunisia>.

⁶ Pew Research Center, "Religious Composition by Country, 2010-2050," dostop 15. 7. 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/feature/religious-composition-by-country-2010-2050/>.

⁷ U.S. Department of State, "2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Tunisia," 1.

⁸ Alice D'Oléon in Charlotte Gambert, "Is Tunisia really a country of religious coexistence?," *La Croix International*, 22. 5. 2023, <https://international.la-croix.com/news/religion/is-tunisia-really-a-country-of-religious-coexistence/17847>.

ne le temnopolti, temveč tudi kristjani. Tunizija beleži povečanje števila podsaharskih migrantov in beguncev vse od leta 2014, zaradi česar se je povečalo tudi število ksenofobnih in rasističnih dejanj. Po podatkih Ben Khalife in Mabrouka se je število podsaharskih migrantov v Tuniziji med letoma 2014 in 2021 s 7.000 potrojilo na 21.400.⁹

Vprašanje migracij, ki skrbi tunizijsko in širšo javnost, je v Tuniziji prisotno iz več razlogov: država je že doživela velike migracije med državljanstvo vojno v Libiji, v zadnjem desetletju pa se sooča z znatnim povečanjem nezakonitega izseljevanja Tunizijcev in državljanov tretjih držav prek čezmorskih begunskih poti, kar je povezano s številnimi nesrečami na morju, v katerih je umrlo ter je pogrešanih veliko beguncev in migrantov.

Zaradi večjega pritoka migrantov iz Podsaharske Afrike je tunizijski predsednik Kais Saied 21. februarja 2023 sklical sejo Sveta za nacionalno varnost. Njegov govor na to temo, ki je bil objavljen na spletu, je sprožil razprave, ki so ga večinoma označile kot ksenofoba in rasista in mu očitale protičrno kampanjo. Shreya Parikh je povzela in analizirala predsednikov govor, v katerem je ta trdil, da je od začetka tega stoletja obstajal dogovor za spremembo demografske sestave Tunizije in da se s tem država naredi »izključno afriška, brez kakršne koli povezave z arabskimi in islamskimi narodi«.¹⁰ K tej izjavi je predsednik dodal, da je treba končati nezakonito priseljevanje, predvsem zato, ker »horde priseljencev« iz Podsaharske Afrike še vedno izvajajo nasilje in se zatekajo h kriminalnim dejanjem. Predsednikova izjava je med tunizijskim prebivalstvom sprožila številne nasilne odzive do podsaharskega prebivalstva in spodbudila strah pred izgubo »arabskomuslimanske« identitete kot posledice tega, da bi postali preveč afriški na podlagi »velike podsaharske zamenjave«.¹¹

⁹ Ben Khalifa in Mehdi Mabrouk, "Discours sur l'immigration subsaharienne en Tunisie: le grand malentendu!", *Confluences Méditerranée* 2023/2 (no 125) : Tunisie : arrêt sur la transition, 92, <https://doi.org/10.58079/t9kn>.

¹⁰ Shreya Parikh, "Making Tunisia non-African again – Saied's anti-Black campaign," *Review of African Political Economy*, 1. 3. 2023, <https://roape.net/2023/03/01/making-tunisia-non-african-again-saieds-anti-black-campaign/>.

¹¹ Prav tam.

Na podlagi te in predhodnih raziskav zagovarjamo tezo, da je analiza odnosov, ki ustvarjajo rasistično retoriko, ključnega pomena, saj lahko le tako razumemo, kako in na kakšni podlagi se prenašajo kolektivni spomini ter kako so rasistične politike vključene v konflikte v regiji in zunaj nje. Trdimo, da redukcija identitete ni samo religijsko in/ali etnično problematična, saj se lahko uporablja kot del rasističnih diskurzov, ki pripadnike določene religijske in/ali etnične skupnosti obravnavajo kot monolit. Hkrati je mogoče redukcionistično religijsko identifikacijo zlorabiti v političnonacionalističnem diskurzu, in sicer z uvedbo religijskega in/ali nacionalnega bistva, ki reduktivno opredeljuje nacionalno identiteto in pušča pred vrati vse, ki ne pripadajo temu označevalcu. Vendar pa je po našem prepričanju vprašanje religije del veliko bolj zapletenega procesa rasizacije in rasizma, ki jo razumemo kot obliko upravljanja presežnega (odvečnega) prebivalstva.

Na podlagi povedanega zagovarjamo tezo, da je rasizacija del kompleksnejše dinamike, ki jo določa kapitalistični način produkcije, ki zaradi svojih notranjih protislovij hkrati zahteva in izloča človeško delovno silo. Tisti, ki so trajno izločeni, so presežno prebivalstvo, ki velja za nevarno in spada pod policijsko pristojnost. Ta proces policijskega obvladovanja presežnih populacij predstavlja sodobni sistemski rasizem kot poseben način državne politike, pri čemer je »rasa« rezultat omenjenega procesa in ni določena s svojimi biološkimi, religijskimi, etničnimi ali kulturnimi značilnostmi. Svojo tezo bomo smo podprli s terensko študijo, ki jo sestavljajo kvalitativni intervjuji s tunizijskimi strokovnjaki, opravljeni na podlagi namenskega vzorčenja in naknadnega kvalitativnega kodiranja, in trije osebni pripovedni intervjuji s podsaharskimi migranti iz Kameruna, ki že več kot leto dni živijo v begunski »vasi« na severu Tunizije. Preden prikažemo potek in rezultate raziskave, pa želimo opredeliti proces rasizacije in razložiti razumevanje arbitrarnosti rase.

Omenjena dinamika je značilna za sodobni kapitalizem in njegovo povezavo s (sistemskim) rasizmom, tj. za svetovni kapitalizem po procesih dekolonizacije v drugi polovici 20. stoletja. Ključni razliki med sodobnim sistemskim rasizmom in preteklimi, kolonialnimi oblikami rasizma sta: 1. način produkcije na koloniziranih ozemljih v preteklosti sam ni kapitalističen (čeprav je bil vpet v nastajajoči svetovni

kapitalistični sistem), posledično tudi oblike rasne segregacije niso bile enake kot v sodobnem kapitalizmu in je tisto, o čemer pišemo v nadaljevanju, značilnost specifično sodobnega kapitalizma; 2. sistemski rasizem je danes povezan s tokovi migracij iz nekdanjih kolonij v nekdanje kolonialne metropole (smer migracij se obrne), zato je današnji sistemski rasizem odločilno povezan z mejnimi in migracijskimi politikami in policijskim upravljanjem migrantskih populacij, ki so z vidika kapitalistične produkcije presežne oziroma odvečne. To razumemo kot sistemski rasizem v navezavi na migracije.

Arbitrarnost rase in proces rasizacije

Rasa je bila zgodovinsko zasnovana pred zgodnjim evropskim kapitalizmom, v procesu kolonialnega osvajanja in pljenja, ki sicer nista bila neposreden del nastajajočega kapitalizma, vendar sta bila njegov nujni pogoj.¹² Konceptualno gledano je bila rasa stranski produkt temne strani razsvetljenstva. Ko je moderna, znanstvena racionalnost nadomestila prejšnje religiozne kozmologije, je bil odpravljen tudi mit o skupnem izvoru človeštva, ki se pred razsvetljenstvom ni delilo na (biološko določene) rase, temveč glede na versko pripadnost. Seveda sta suženjstvo in kolonialna ekspanzija obstajala že dolgo pred kapitalizmom, vendar pred njim nista bila upravičevana s sklicevanjem na znanost in biološke razlike med ljudmi.¹³

Tisti, ki so bili rasno označeni, so bili zreducirani na živalskost – bili so sužnji in nesvobodni delavci, ki so lahko bili plačani, vendar svoje delovne sile niso mogli prosto prodajati, kar pomeni, da so bili osebno odvisni od svojih delodajalcev.¹⁴ Od začetka kapitalizma je bila rasa (ali rasizem kot proces družbenega pripisovanja rase) oblika družbene dominacije, ki je bila povezana z razmerjem med notranjostjo in zunanostjo kapitalistične družbe. Z drugimi besedami: rasa označuje tiste, ki so zunaj in družbeno izključeni. Z vidika odnosov družbene dominacije

¹² Heide Gerstenberger, *Market and Violence* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 37–110.

¹³ Loren Goldner, "Race and Enlightenment I," *Libcom*, 11. 1. 2010, <https://libcom.org/article/race-and-enlightenment-part-i-anti-semitism-white-supremacy-1492-1676>.

¹⁴ Loren Goldner, "Race and Enlightenment II," *Libcom*, 12. 1. 2010, <https://libcom.org/article/race-and-enlightenment-part-ii-anglo-french-enlightenment-and-beyond>.

so rasizirani tisti, ki so (delno ali v celoti) zunaj kapitalskega razmerja, tj. tisti, ki niso neposredno vključeni niti v družbeno produkcijo niti v reprodukcijo.¹⁵ V času kolonializma je rasizacija potekala onkraj kapitalističnih razmerij (predvsem na osnovi biologizma in evolucionizma), saj so bila ta omejena na kolonialne metropole, medtem ko način produkcije v kolonijah (še) ni bil kapitalističen. Danes poteka na mejah kapitalističnih razmerij – tako političnih mejah, tj. mejah med državami, kjer poteka proces selekcije oziroma priznanja državljanstva ter iz tega izhajajočih političnih in socialnih pravic na eni strani ter odrekanja teh pravic in posledičnega zavračanja, deportacij ali zapiranja; kot tudi socialnih mejah, tj. mejah med možnostjo dostopa do pravic in zakonite ekonomije na eni strani ter obsojenostjo na kriminalizirano življenje in policijsko upravljanje migrantov v nekdanjih kolonialnih metropolah na drugi.¹⁶ V času kolonializma so bili številni belci izključeni iz kapitalskih razmerij, vendar ne tudi enako rasizirani (npr. ženske, otroci, kmetje ...), kot so danes migranti, toda le zato, ker so bili, čeprav niso bili neposredno vključeni v kapitalistično produkcijo, še vseeno del kapitalistične *reprodukcije*, hkrati pa je bila v času kolonializma za proces rasizacije bolj kot vključenost v kapitalistična razmerja odločilna razlika med metropolo in kolonijo (rasizirani so bili prvotni prebivalci kolonij in sužnji, pripeljani od tam).

V nasprotju s sodobnimi kulturnimi rasizmi posamezne rase nimajo natančno določenih kultur, temveč oblika družbene dominacije, ki temelji na (delni ali popolni) izključenosti iz družbene produkcije (in reprodukcije), nalaga določeno kulturo življenja in dela določenim barvam kože. Za razumevanje delovanja rasne segregacije v kapitalizmu ni ključna povezava med biologijo in družbo, temveč povezava med logiko družbene izključenosti na eni strani ter dominacijo, ki se veže na razlikovanje na podlagi barve kože in drugih bioloških značilnosti,

¹⁵ Chris Chen, "The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality," *Endnotes* 3, 2013, <https://endnotes.org.uk/articles/the-limit-point-of-capitalist-equality>.

¹⁶ Gl. koncept nevidne policijske države v Sonja Buckel in Jens Wissel, "State Project Europe," *International Political Sociology* 4, št. 1 (2010): 33–49, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-5687.2009.00089.x>.

na drugi.¹⁷ Ta povezava je razmeroma elastična – tako kot se lahko posamezni temnopolti prebijejo v svet plačanega dela, lahko tudi belci zdrsejo v revščino in popolno družbeno izključenost in tako postanejo del rase. Irci so na primer, ko so bili tarča britanskega kolonializma, veljali za ločeno, posebno irsko raso, ki ni bila del uradne definicije belskosti,¹⁸ pozneje pa so se ponovno pridružili svetu belcev. Po drugi strani se lahko danes tudi prej rasno označeni migranti (sicer redko in težko) prebijejo v svet formalne kapitalistične ekonomije, državljanstva in pravic in s tem izgubijo rasno označenost, čeprav se barva njihove kože ne spremeni niti za odtenek. Kot smo omenili že na primeru opredelitve novega rasizma, ni nujno, da sta ustvarjanje in reprodukcija rase povezana z biološkimi razlikami – namesto njih lahko nastopijo kulturne značilnosti kot v primeru »rasizacije« muslimanov v današnji EU.

Če na raso gledamo kot na »identiteto«, na rasizem pa kot na niz subjektivnih odzivov na to »identiteto«, zamenjamo vzrok in posledico. Telesne razlike med različnimi skupinami ljudi seveda obstajajo. Vendar te razlike ne pomenijo posebnih »ras« ter ne pojasnjujejo nasilnega in izključujočega odnosa do družbenih skupin z določeno barvo kože ali obliko obraza. Brez upoštevanja delovanja systemskega rasizma ne moremo razložiti, zakaj lahko nekatere telesne razlike (in tudi etnične ali religijske razlike) ljudi obsodijo na policijsko nasilje, nevarnost deportacije ter družbeno in politično izključenost, medtem ko druge (na primer velikost ušes) niso družbeno pomembne in so komaj opazne, če sploh.¹⁹ Rasa in rasno označevanje sta z barvo kože povezana le občasno in priložnostno, zgodovinsko je bila odločujoča družbena razlika med kolonisti in koloniziranimi ter lastniki sužnjev in sužnji, medtem ko je v sodobnem kapitalizmu odločilna razlika med vključenimi v formalni del kapitalistične ekonomije in izključenimi iz nje.

Za dodatno ponazoritev te točke si lahko ogledamo zgodovino suženjstva in rasizma v ZDA. Tam ključna družbena razlika ni bila to-

¹⁷ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

¹⁸ Bruce Nelson, *Irish Nationalists and the Making of the Irish Race* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

¹⁹ Frank Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx," *Social Identities* 9, št. 2 (2003): 225–240, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350463032000101579>.

liko biološka razlika med belci in črnci, temveč razlika med sužnji in svobodnimi ljudmi – ideološka in institucionalna konstrukcija domnevne manjvrednosti črncev je pomenila ideološki »prevod« te razlike v rasno.²⁰ Arbitrarnost rase, tj. da rasa ni izhodišče rasizma, temveč njegov rezultat, postane še očitnejša, ko iz ameriškega konteksta preidemo v sodobni kontekst EU, kjer so meje rasne delitve veliko bolj fluidne in nestabilne. Čeprav je bil rasizem v preteklosti zasnovan biološko, sodobni (sistemski) rasizem ne temelji več (izključno) na bioloških razlikah. Namesto tega v številnih primerih temelji na (resničnih ali izmišljenih) kulturnih razlikah, ki pa se, na primer pri obravnavi muslimanskih migrantov v EU, uporabljajo enako kot barva kože ali oblika obraza v prvotnem biološkem rasizmu: kot označevalci družbene in politične izključenosti. Osnovni mehanizem sistemskega rasizma tako ostaja enak ne glede na to, ali so označevalci družbene in politične izključenosti biološki ali kulturni.

Če strnemo: sodobni sistemski rasizem je oblika družbene segregacije in policijskega upravljanja ekonomsko odvečnih in zato presežnih populacij v kontekstu svetovnega kapitalizma. Sistemski rasizem je tesno povezan s procesom migracij, saj presežne populacije iz ekonomsko opustošenih območij, kot je Podsaharska Afrika, množično migrirajo v ekonomsko uspešnejša območja, kot je EU, posledično se prakse družbene in politične segregacije večinoma dogajajo na mejah ter skozi selektivno in diskriminatorno policijsko obravnavo migrantov.²¹

Vrnimo se na tunizijski primer, ki je še posebej zanimiv, saj združuje elemente biološkega (črnci) in kulturnega (kristjani) rasizma. Problematični govor tunizijskega predsednika, ki je raziziral podsaharske migrante in jih imenoval Afričane, postulira idejo homogene kategorije, ki zanika individualne posebnosti subjektov, njihovo etnično, religijsko in politično pripadnost, hkrati pa odpira vprašanje, kako Tunizija razume sebe in druge severnoafriške države. Ali Tunizija pripada Bližnjemu vzhodu ali muslimanskemu Magrebu? Ker je Tunizija geografsko del Afrike in so zato Tunizijci tudi geografsko afriški, nas bo

²⁰ Saidya Hartman. *Scenes of Subjection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²¹ O pomenu selektivnega podeljevanja oziroma odrekanja državljanstva za sodobni sistemski rasizem v povezavi s kapitalizmom gl. Gaspar Miklos Tamas, *Komunizem po letu 1989* (Ljubljana: Sophia, 2016), 215–253.

zanimalo, kako in zakaj prihaja do rasizacije podsaharskih migrantov. Če je problem družbeno konstruiranega Magreba kolonialna tvorba, ali tudi v primeru tunizijskega odnosa do Podsaharcev kolonizirani postane kolonizator?²² Ali lahko v kopiranju načinov delovanja in izvajanja politik zaznamo evropsko (zahodnjaško) rasizacijo migrantov?

Predstavitev in rezultati terena

Raziskava, ki smo jo med julijem in avgustom 2023 izvedli v Tuniziji, je potekala v dveh fazah.²³ V prvi smo opravili 11 poglobljenih ali kvalitativnih intervjujev s tunizijskimi strokovnjaki, sociologi, novinarji, aktivisti, učitelji in profesorji in poglobljen intervju s strokovnjakom za migracije iz Gvineje. Uporabili smo namensko ali presojevalno vzorčenje, kar pomeni, da smo strokovnjake izbrali namenoma, saj smo ocenili, da imajo znanje in značilnosti, ki smo jih potrebovali za pridobitev najboljših informacij za dosego ciljev študije. Pet intervjujev je bilo opravljenih osebno, šest pa prek spleta prek platforme Zoom. Vse intervjuvance smo anonimizirali.

Opis vzorca strokovnjakov je tak: intervjuvali smo enajst Tunizijcev, od tega devet moških in dve ženski, povprečna starost pa je bila 46 let. Vsak intervjuvanec ima visokošolsko izobrazbo, med njimi je bila večina sociologov (5), en antropolog, dva pravnik in en farmacevt. Preostali so samo potrdili, da imajo univerzitetno izobrazbo. Dva strokovnjaka sta doktorja znanosti, šest jih prihaja iz Tunisa, dva iz Nefte/Tozeurja, trije pa iz Sfxa, Siliane in Hammameta. Med drugimi strokovnjaki so predstavnik nacionalnega observatorija za človekove pravice (L'Observatoire national des droits de l'homme) in dva univerzitetna profesorja s strokovnim znanjem s področja migracij. Kot posebnega

²² Franz Fanon, *Črna koža, bele maske* (Ljubljana: Studia Humanitatis, 2016), 73–94.

²³ Naj pri utemeljitvi strukture in izbora raziskovalnih blokov dodamo, da sledimo humanistični misli Paula Feyerabenda. Ta v študiji z naslovom *Proti metodi* (Ljubljana: Studia humanitatis, 1999) kot znanstveno razume spoznavno in metodološko prilagajanje terenu in se ne veže na kalupljenje, ki episteme predalčka po že obstoječih obrazcih ter s tem prezre mnogovrstne zgodovinske in sociokulturne nianse, ki omogočajo alternativne analitične možnosti. V želji po preseganju akademskega kolonializma in neoliberalne produkcije znanja za potrjevanje že obstoječih ugotovitev si avtorja drzneta tvegati metodološko nepokorščino v feyerabendovski maniri.

strokovnjaka smo intervjuvali tudi aktivista iz Gvineje (moški, star 35 let, visoko izobražen, v Tuniziji živi že 15 let, najprej kot študent, delal je v različnih organizacijah za zaščito migrantov).

Trije sklopi vprašanj so zajemali te teme:

1. kaj pomeni biti Tunizijec (osebni, pripovedni del intervjuja);
2. vloga islama v tunizijski družbi (intervju s strokovnjakom);
3. kako razumeti odnos Tunizijcev do Podsaharcev (intervju s strokovnjakom).

Namensko vzorčenje in kvalitativna analiza s kodiranjem sta bila izvedena v serijah. Prvi pripovedni del intervjuja je bil namenjen osebne-
mu razumevanju tunizijske identitete. Glede na kvalitativno kodiranje šest intervjuvancev tunizijsko identiteto razume kot združitev ali preplet različnih civilizacij in kultur:

- Tunizijci niso le muslimani in Arabci, ampak tudi Berberi (Amazigi) itd. Povezujejo jih tradicija in običaji, skupna zgodovina in arheologija.
- Tunizijska identiteta je združitev različnih identitet: sestavljena je iz osmanske, islamske, arabske, italijanske, francoske, libanonske in afriške.
- Tunizijska identiteta ni muslimansko-arabska. Je mešanica sredozemske identitete. Kaj pomeni biti Tunizijec, je stvar politike. Politika ustvarja identiteto. Med olimpijskimi igrami leta 1967 se je oblikovala sredozemska, afriška in mednarodna identiteta. Vprašanje muslimanske identitete je sodobnejše. Zakaj in kdaj to postane pomembno? Gre za populistični diskurz, ki ustreza ljudem, biti priljubljen, instrumentalizacija identitete, manipulacija z identiteto.

Štirje so poudarili, da je identiteta povezana z ozemljem ali državo, dva od teh odgovorov pa sta jo povezala z ozemljem in islamom kot političnim dejavnikom:

- Identiteta je domovina, pluralizem v versko-etničnem smislu, civilizacija zgodovine.
- Tunizijci so večinoma muslimani. Islam je bolj politika kot religija. Do Zahoda smo zelo odprti, zato nimamo pretiranih is-

lamskih poudarkov. Gospodarske in politične razmere kažejo, da smo pod vplivom kolonializma in ne želimo sprejeti sprememb.

- Identitete ni, obstajajo strateške identitete. Tunizijska identiteta je ozemeljska identiteta.

Dva intervjuvanca tunizijsko identiteto izrecno povezujeta z islamom, islam pa z moralo:

- Tunizijska identiteta pomeni pripadnost državi. Islam ni več tako pomemben del identitete kot nekoč. Tradicionalna vloga islama v družbi se je zmanjšala, z njo pa se je zmanjšala tudi morala v družbi.
- Islam je temeljni element tunizijske identitete. 95 % jih je muslimanov, zato imajo moralo muslimanov.

Druga strokovna tema obravnava vlogo islama v tunizijski družbi. Iz odgovorov je razvidno, da islam ostaja ključni element povezovanja, sodelovanja in opredelitve tunizijske identitete. Kvalitativno kodiranje odgovorov je pokazalo, da je islam res sestavni del tunizijske družbe, vendar je predvsem merilo kulturne pripadnosti in ne (samo) verovanja.

- Islam je eden od temeljev. Vendar obstaja veliko islamov – različne prakse in načini razmišljanja.
- Islam je več kot religija, je povezovalni element (lepilo), saj določa načine vedenja, navade, je vir morale in vrednot, povezuje družine, oživlja odnose (če so družine ali družinski člani sperti, jih poveže praznovanje islamskih praznikov).
- Islam je del tunizijske kulture. Tunizijci niso zelo verni, vendar je to njihov način življenja – socializacija. Vendar ne molijo toliko kot Arabci v drugih kulturah. V tunizijski ustavi je zapisano, da smo muslimani, vendar to ne pomeni posebne identitete. Poskušamo modernizirati državo in ločiti religijo od države, vendar nam tokrat ni uspelo.

V tretjem poglavju proučujemo, kako v okviru predsednikovega govora razumeti odnos Tunizijcev do Podsaharcev. Kvalitativno kodiranje odgovorov, ki temelji na odgovorih strokovnjakov, je poudarilo presečišče rasizma z naraščajočim številom prebivalstva:

- Ne želijo videti preveč črncev, ker menijo, da bodo ti postali kriminalci, saj ni dovolj hrane in virov za vse. Gre za vprašanje varnosti.

- Z naraščanjem števila prebivalcev se Tunizijci začnejo bati umazanih, beračev in kriminala. Migranti delajo za malo denarja in so konkurenca Tunizijcem.
- Podsaharci želijo ostati v Tuniziji, ker je položaj žensk tam boljši kot v Podsaharski Afriki. Vendar Podsaharci nimajo enake kulture in vrednot. To je težava za številne Tunizijce. V Tuniziji so Podsaharci brez hrane in denarja. Tunizijci jim zaradi gospodarske krize tudi ne morejo pomagati. Podsaharski migranti potrebujejo delovno zakonodajo, ki jim bo pomagala pri delu v Tuniziji. Za 2.000 študentov iz Podsaharske Afrike pa ni težav, saj imajo štipendijo.
- Tunizijci so rasistični do črncev – Podsaharcev. Ne želijo, da se njihove hčere poročijo s Podsaharci. Rasistični so tudi do homoseksualcev ter do revnih, obubožanih in zapuščenih. Za to so krivi izobraževanje, kultura in politični sistem. Smo zelo toga družba, ki temelji na religiji in družini. Vse se glasi: »to je *haram*« (»prepovedano«, »nečisto«).
- Rasizem proti Podsaharcem je propaganda, saj imamo veliko Tunizijcev, ki so črnci. Težava so delovne pravice Podsaharcev – plačani so manj, nimajo urejenih pogodb. Tunizijci doživljamo gospodarski zlom in iščemo razloge, zakaj trpimo, zato uporabljamo retoriko, da so krivi migranti. Država je pod pritiskom, gospodarstvo se sesuva, predsednik je v svojem govoru naredil napako, vendar te retorike ne ponavlja.
- Ko se število podsaharskih Afričanov poveča, ljudje postanejo rasisti. Če bi bilo število manjše, bi ljudje pomagali.

Zadnji intervjuvanec je v svojem odgovoru izpostavil primer iz Sirije. Poudaril je, da so ti begunci muslimani. Ko je bilo beguncev iz Sirije manj, so jim Tunizijci dali hrano, denar in prostor za bivanje. Ko pa se je število beguncev povečalo, se je to spremenilo, čeprav so bili sirski begunci tako muslimani kot Arabci. Iz odgovora je razvidno, da so se razlike med muslimanskimi in nemuslimanskimi begunci oziroma razlike v religijski pripadnosti in razlike v barvi kože izničile, ko je število beguncev preseglo kritično število.

V drugem krogu raziskave, ki je potekala februarja in marca 2024, smo v Tuniziji osebno opravili poglobljene pripovedne intervjuje s tremi begunci iz Kameruna: M (M, 18 let), N (M, 25 let) in O (M, 29 let). Vsi so kristjani s srednješolsko izobrazbo na tehničnih področjih. Že leto in pol živijo v šotorih na podeželju na severu Tunizije. Po njihovih navedbah je v taborišču več kot 50.000 Podsaharcev, vključno z otroki in ženskami. Številne ženske so bile posiljene na poljih zunaj taborišča. Vsi si želijo v Evropo, vendar nimajo denarja za potovanje, ki stane več tisoč evrov. Nekaj njihovi odgovorov, ki opisujejo položaj in odnos tunizijskega prebivalstva do podsaharskih beguncev:

Tunizijci nas imenujejo Afričani. Pljuvajo za mano. Ko me vidijo na avtobusu, si zatiskajo nos. Smo kot smeti. (M)

Imenujejo nas Afričani. V Tuniziji je težko ostati. Ves čas nas ustavlja policija. Ne moremo si urediti dovoljenja za bivanje. (N).

Vodo, ki stane 1 dinar, nam v nekaterih trgovinah prodajajo za 1,30 dinarja. Ker smo Afričani. (O)

Razizem do kristjanov se razkriva prav v odgovorih, ki se nanašajo na iskanje zaposlitve:

Poskušamo najti delo, da bi preživeli. Delo na črno v gradbeništvu itd. Plačujejo nas manj kot Tunizijce. Na primer namesto 7 dni nam plačajo 4. Če želimo protestirati, pravijo, da nas bodo prijaviли policiji. (N)

Če želimo dobiti službo, moramo spremeniti imena. Vsak, ki nam lahko da delo, nas vpraša, ali smo muslimani. Če si musliman, lahko delaš, če si kristjan, nam dela ne dajo. Ne želijo delati s kristjani. (M)

Dvojni razizem. Ker smo črnci in ker smo kristjani. (O)

Dvakrat sem izgubil službo, ker sem rekel, da sem kristjan. Zdaj pravim, da sem musliman, ker potrebujem službo. Potrebujejo nas za težaška dela. Če pa ugotovijo, da smo kristjani, nam tudi težkega dela ne dajo. (M)

Dodatni odgovori potrjujejo naše teoretično stališče, da revni »migrant« ali »begunec« postane depersonalizirana kategorija odvečnosti, ki se je je treba znebiti. Nimajo več lastnih imen in vrednot, so le breme oziroma tako imenovana strupena kategorija. Kot je razvidno iz njihovih odgovorov, je celo interakcija z njimi lahko kazniva:

Ko pride policija, nas nekaj prijaznih Tunizijcev (domačinov) opozori, naj bežimo, ker policija preganja migrante in ker je stik z nami nezakonit. Če bo policija videla, da mi je Tunizijec dal kruh, bo morda imel težave. (M)

Čeprav sem imel dokument, da sem begunec, me je policist dal aretirati. (O)

Presežno prebivalstvo in kapitalistični način produkcije

Na podlagi pridobljenih odgovorov smo ugotovili, da niti barva kože niti religijska pripadnost osebe ne povzroča prvotne rasizacije, temveč sta obe posledici rasizacije presežnega prebivalstva, ki jo narokuje kapitalistični način produkcije.

Osnovni cilj kapitalističnega načina produkcije je neomejeno in neskončno povečevanje presežne vrednosti. Produkcija presežne vrednosti vključuje tudi uporabo človeške delovne sile, vendar zaradi protislovne notranje dinamike kapitalističnega razvoja (naraščajoča avtomatizacija in financializacija) trenutno vse več ljudi ostaja ob strani. Razširjena reprodukcija kapitala gre tako lahko z roko v roki s krčenjem družbene reprodukcije, kjer vse večji delež ljudi ni več vključen v plačano delo in ni le klasična »rezervna armada« delovne sile, temveč popolnoma odvečno prebivalstvo.²⁴

To presežno prebivalstvo, ki ostaja na obrobju ali popolnoma zunaj kapitalističnega družbenega razvoja,²⁵ je posebna kapitalistična družbena oblika rase, tj. družbena oblika, ki jo producira kapitalizem sam, in ni anahronistični ostanek predkapitalističnih družbenih formacij ali posledica predsodkov, temveč objektivni družbeni odnos dominacije in segregacije. Rasne manjšine so zunaj (formalnega) plačnega razmerja, vendar jih kapital kljub temu formalno določa.²⁶ Rasno opredeljene osebe namreč niso nič manj eksistenčno odvisne od dostopa do denarja za preživetje kot proletarci, le da v nasprotju z njimi nimajo neposrednega dostopa niti do svobodnega plačanega dela niti do posrednih oblik državno organiziranega socialnega varstva.

²⁴ Endnotes, "Misery and Debt", *Endnotes 2* (2010), <https://endnotes.org.uk/articles/misery-and-debt>.

²⁵ Mike Davis, *Planet slumov* (Ljubljana: */cf., 2009), 224–254.

²⁶ Chen, "Capitalist Equality."

Razmerje med sodobnimi oblikami rasizma in kapitalističnim načinom produkcije torej ni neposredno. Rasa je človeški »preostanek«, ki ga kapitalizem ne more ali noče produktivno absorbirati. Kapitalizem si ne prizadeva za polno zaposlenost ali materialno blaginjo vseh.²⁷ Nasprotno, prizadeva si za dobičkonosno uporabo kapitala in delovne sile, kar pomeni, da je zaradi tehnoloških inovacij, kriz ali drugih nepredvidljivih dejavnikov del človeštva vedno odvečen. Rasa je tisti del celotnega prebivalstva, ki je trajno ekonomsko (in s tem družbeno) odveč. Tako je sodobni sistemski rasizem proces ekonomskega in socialnega izključevanja ter hkrati rezultat segregacijskega državnega upravljanja odvečnega in izključenega prebivalstva.²⁸

Odvečno prebivalstvo mora za preživetje uporabljati neformalno ekonomijo in kriminal. Ker z raso v nasprotju z delavskim razredom ne upravlja zasebni kapital, nadzor nadnjo prevzame država. In ker ni podvržena tihi prisili tržnih razmerij,²⁹ se za njeno upravljanje in discipliniranje njenih antagonizmov uporablja neposredno, odkrito nasilje.³⁰ V nasprotju z ideologijo »vitke države« so se v neoliberalnem obdobju moč, oblast in obseg države povečali, zlasti njena represivna razsežnost³¹ – zmanjšal se je le obseg njene socialne razsežnosti. Način življenja rase na robu družbe je kriminaliziran, podvržen nenehnemu policijskemu nadzoru in večinoma premeščen v zapore.³² Ta nova rasa je dejansko kapitalistična rasa ali oblika rase, ki ustreza sodobnemu kapitalizmu. Izključitev rase iz družbene produkcije, njena ločitev od dostopa do plačanega dela, ni absolutna, vendar je plačano delo, dostopno rasi, nesvobodno. Rasa je lahko vključena v plačano delo le na

²⁷ Michael Heinrich, *Kritika politične ekonomije* (Ljubljana: Sophia, 2013), 116–121.

²⁸ Surplus Club, "Trapped at a Party Where No One Likes You," *SIC* 3 (2015), <https://www.sicjournal.org/trapped-at-a-party-where-no-one-likes-you/index.html>.

²⁹ Søren Mau, *Mute Compulsion* (London: Verso, 2023).

³⁰ Chen, "Capitalist Equality."

³¹ Bernard Harcourt, *The Illusion of Free Markets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

³² Loïc Wacquant, *Zapori revščine* (Ljubljana: */cf., 2008).

način, ki ne ustreza klasični opredelitvi »dvojne svobode« delavca,³³ tj. kot prisilno delo ali nove oblike suženjstva.³⁴

Povečanje prekarnosti, revščine in brezposelnosti po neoliberalnih ekonomskih in socialnih reformah v devetdesetih letih prejšnjega stoletja je pomenilo tudi poostreno policijsko nadzorstvo nad migranti, strožjo segregacijo etničnih manjšin in vse večjo marginalizacijo že tako krhkega in skromnega preživetja socialno izključenih oseb. Današnja EU zaostre svoje mejne in migracijske politike ter policijske metode za upravljanje presežnega prebivalstva, kar spremljajo propagandne kampanje o »begunski krizi« in rasnih grožnjah.³⁵ Sistemski rasizem – ki ga EU izvaja tudi v severnoafriških strateških partnerstvih – je proces političnega in policijskega upravljanja presežnega prebivalstva. Natančneje to pomeni zapiranje v običajne zapore in centre za pridržanje priseljencev, policijski nadzor in nadlegovanje, urbano segregacijo ter onemogočanje dostopa do političnih in socialnih pravic, ki so rezervirane za »produktivni« del prebivalstva. Ključni razsežnosti državnega ali sistemskega rasizma sta kriminalizacija in nadzor življenja rase znotraj države ter nadzor meja in migracijskih tokov navzven.

Vloga Tunizije v zunanji migracijski politiki EU ima dolgo tradicijo. Po besedah Vasje Badaliča si EU od konca devetdesetih let prejšnjega stoletja »prizadeva, da bi 'upravljanje migracij' prenesla na tretje države, da bi nezakonitim migrantom, vključno s prosilci za azil, preprečila vstop na ozemlje EU«.³⁶ Tunizija in EU sta 16. julija 2023 sklenili še eno strateško partnerstvo za preprečevanje nezakonitih migracij. V skladu s t. i. memorandumom o soglasju med EU in Tunizijo naj bi zadnja prejela 105 milijonov EUR za preprečevanje nezakonitih migracij s krepitvijo tunizijske obalne straže, ki bi s pomočjo dodatnih nadzornih čolnov, opremljenih s toplotnimi kamerami, preprečevala nezakonite migracije po morju. Memorandum se torej nanaša na t. i. upravljanje

³³ Heinrich, *Kritika politične ekonomije*, 87–90.

³⁴ Tom Brass, "Capitalist Unfree Labour," *Critical Sociology* 35, št. 6 (2009): 743–765, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920509343059>.

³⁵ Jelka Zorn, "Od izjeme do norme," *Časopis za kritiko znanosti* 34, št. 226 (2006).

³⁶ Vasja Badalič, "Tunisia's Role in the EU External Migration Policy: Crimmigration Law, Illegal Practices, and Their Impact on Human Rights," *Journal of International Migration & Integration* 20 (2019): 86.

meja, čeprav ostaja nejasno, kdo naj bi ta sporazum izvajal, saj je bil sporazum podpisan »brez vzpostavljenih pogojev glede človekovih pravic, brez ocene ali spremljanja njegovega vpliva na človekove pravice in brez mehanizma za prekinitev sodelovanja v primeru zlorabe.«³⁷ Evropski kritični mediji in aktivisti očitajo EU, da se iz primera sodelovanja z Libijo ni ničesar naučila. To sodelovanje je zajemalo podporo EU libijskim varnostnim silam, zaradi česar je bila EU sokriva za nasilje nad migranti in begunci, vključno s posilstvi, pretepi, prisilnimi deportacijami, nezakonitimi uboji in samovoljnim pridržanjem.

Sistemi rasizem kot državni rasizem

Februarja 2024 smo prek platforme Zoom opravili poglobljen strokovni intervju z aktivistom iz Gvineje (G1), ki je 15 let živel v Tuniziji, kjer je študiral in sodeloval v različnih organizacijah za zaščito migrantov.

Meni, da je nasilje nad Podsaharci posledica rasističnega govora, ki ga širijo mediji. Po njegovem mnenju je pritisk EU na Tunizijo, naj omeji migracijske tokove, privedel do povečanja rasizma. Poleg tega je tunizijska vlada obremenjena s tisoči beguncev, kar je povzročilo njene ksenofobne oziroma rasistične odzive, ki pa so posledica gospodarske in tehnične pomoči EU – npr. veliko temnopoltih Afričanov je aretiranih na ulici. Intervjuvanec posebej poudarja, da je rasizem do Podsaharcev v Tuniziji odvisen od materialnih pogojev: če so Podsaharci premožni, se redno vpisujejo v šole ali vstopajo v Tunizijo z delovnim vizumom, rasizem ni izrazit. Če pa so revni begunci, so izpostavljeni nasilju policije in nacionalne garde, ki jim je vseeno, ali umrejo na morju ali pa jih potisnejo na meje Alžirije in Libije (G1).

Rasizem ni stvar osebne psihologije ali ideologije, temveč institucionalnih ureditev in segregacijskih družbenih procesov. Rasizem je državna politika odrekanja pravic ter posledično političnega in družbenega izključevanja določenih skupin prebivalstva. To ne pomeni, da sovraštvo in predsodki do beguncev, migrantov in tujcev ne obstaja-

³⁷ Paola Tamma, "Europe's 'template' for migration: Tunisian strongman's racist clamp-down," *Politico*, 28. 8. 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-tunisia-strongman-kais-saied-curb-migration/>.

jo, le da niso izhodišče ali motivacija za rasizem, temveč njegov učinek. V sodobnem kapitalizmu je rasizem vedno državni rasizem. Ta določa in ohranja tako notranje (kdo, v kakšnih okoliščinah in koliko si zasluži status državljana in dostop do redne zaposlitve) kot zunanje meje.

Državni rasizem je metoda policijskega nadzora nad ljudmi, ki ne spadajo nikamor: begunci, osebe brez dokumentov, prebivalci getov, kriminalizirane rasne manjšine. Kot tak je nasprotna stran pravne države.³⁸ Državni rasizem je »varovanje meje« v teritorialnem in družbenem smislu, način določanja in odločanja, kdo lahko vstopi v nacionalno skupnost in pod kakšnimi pogoji, in metoda upravljanja tistih, ki se znajdejo na ozemlju določene nacionalne skupnosti, čeprav ji ne pripadajo ali ne morejo pripadati. Tudi Foucault je sodobni rasizem opredelil kot stvar države.³⁹ Moderne nacionalne države, ki sicer skrbijo za dolžino in kakovost življenja ter zdravje in rodnost prebivalstva, se zatečejo k rasizmu v primerih, ko je treba ubijati. To ne pomeni (nujno) neposrednega ubijanja – to je bilo značilno za izvajanje suverene oblasti pred pojavom biopolitike –, temveč »posreden umor: dejstvo, da nekoga izpostavimo smrti, da nekatere izpostavimo večji življenjski nevarnosti, ali preprosto politično smrt, izgon, zavračanje itn.«⁴⁰

Zaključek

Da bi izboljšali razumevanje rasizacije migrantov in beguncev v Tuniziji, smo v prvem krogu raziskave opravili poglobljene oziroma kvalitativne intervjuje s tunizijskimi strokovnjaki. Namen teh je bil, prvič, razumeti družbeno-kulturne vzorce oblikovanja tunizijske identitete in vloge, ki jo ima islam v tunizijski družbi, ter, drugič, razumeti njihov odnos do podsaharskih migrantov in beguncev, ki so večinoma temnopolti in med katerimi je veliko kristjanov. Vprašanja znotraj tematskih sklopov so bila zasnovana tako, da so obravnavala ključno vprašanje, ki ga je poudaril predsednikov govor februarja 2023.

³⁸ Buckel in Wissel, "State Project Europe".

³⁹ Michel Foucault, "*Družbo je treba braniti*," prev. Ana Monika Habjan (Ljubljana: Studia humanitatis, 2015), 257–283.

⁴⁰ Prav tam, 276.

Kot so pokazali rezultati, se tunizijska identiteta dojema predvsem kot skupek različnih civilizacij in kultur, vezanih na ozemlje, in čeprav ostaja islam kot konstitutivni del tunizijske družbe eden od ključnih elementov vključevanja in sodelovanja, je kvalitativno kodiranje odgovorov pokazalo, da je predvsem merilo kulturne pripadnosti. V drugem krogu raziskave smo opravili poglobljene pripovedne intervjuje s krščanskimi begunci iz Kameruna v Tuniziji. Na podlagi njihovih odgovorov smo potrdili tezo, da niti barva kože niti verska pripadnost ne povzroča prvotne rasizacije.

V odgovorih je bil med drugim poudarjen primer sirskih beguncev, večinoma muslimanov, ki so leta 2011 ob začetku vojne v Siriji v manjšem številu pribežali v Tunizijo in bili deležni velike pomoči lokalnega prebivalstva, ki jim je pomagalo s hrano, denarjem in celo nastanitvijo. Ko pa je njihovo število začelo naraščati, se je pomoč beguncem zmanjšala, čeprav so bili muslimani in Arabci. To je le eden od primerov, ki lahko potrdi našo tezo, da se razlike v religijski pripadnosti izničijo, ko število beguncev preseže kritično število. V potrditev teze, da tudi barva kože ni odločilna, je, kot so pokazali rezultati, rasizem do Podсахarcev v Tuniziji odvisen od materialnih pogojev: če so ti premožni, se redno vpisujejo v šole ali vstopajo v Tunizijo z delovnim vizumom, rasizem ni izrazit. Če pa so revni begunci, so izpostavljeni nasilju policije in nacionalne garde, ki jim je vseeno, ali umrejo na morju ali pa jih potisnejo na meje Alžirije in Libije.

Kvalitativno kodiranje odgovorov strokovnjakov, ki je poudarilo preplet rasizma s povečevanjem števila prebivalstva, potrjuje našo tezo, da kapitalistični način proizvodnje zaradi svojih notranjih protislovij hkrati zahteva in izloča človeško delovno silo. Tisti, ki so trajno izgnani, so odvečno prebivalstvo, ki zaradi tega, ker ga kapitalistični trgi ne disciplinirajo, velja za nevarno in spada pod pristojnost policije. Ta proces policijskega obvladovanja presežnega prebivalstva je tisto, kar predstavlja sodobni sistemski rasizem kot poseben način državne politike, pri čemer je »rasa« rezultat omenjenega procesa in ni določena z biološkimi, religijskimi, etničnimi ali kulturnimi značilnostmi. Tunizijski odnos do migrantov in beguncev prevzema značilnosti evropskega modela,

ki je blizu temu, kar Balibar imenuje neorasizem.⁴¹ V EU in njenih severnoafriških partnerskih državah, kot je Tunizija, deluje rasizem kot politika sistemske socialne izključenosti in segregacije zelo heterogenega in raznolikega nabora družbenih in etničnih skupin, ki nimajo nobene posebne biološke ali kulturne značilnosti, vendar so vse tarče izgona, pridržanja v centrih za pridržanje priseljencev, policijskega nasilja in nadlegovanja ter segregacije v mestih. Podrejena rasa ni nobena družbena skupina, ki bi bila jasno razmejena po religijskih oziroma kulturnih ali bioloških značilnostih, temveč amorfna družbena skupina beguncev in migrantov. Ne opredeljujejo jih skupni izvor, videz, religija ali kultura, temveč politični in družbeni odnosi, v katere so vključeni kot begunci ali migranti.

Zahvala

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A B S T R A C T S

Victoria Dos Santos, Eduardo Cruz

Materiality, Religion and the Digital: A Theoretical Exploration of Material Religion in Immersive Platforms

This article proposes that the material dimension of religion can be articulated and experienced online. Considering that religion is an embodied phenomenon which relies on material elements, this paper will particularly focus on religious practices taking place in immersive virtual platforms in order to comprehend how the material dimension is manifested by users in their everyday life. Through a theoretical analysis, we propose that 3D social virtual worlds efficiently enable users to experience key material aspects such as embodiment and space, due to their high levels of immersivity, interactivity, and agency, by embodying avatars in customizable spaces. Meyer's theory of mediation, Hoover and Echchaibi's Third Spaces of Digital Religion, and Campbell's theory of Religious–Social Shaping of Digital Technology (RSST) allows us to center the discussion on how religions are practiced and experienced by individuals and communities through various mediation practices, and how digital media acquires more affective meanings when they are involved in religious pursuits.

Keywords: digital religion, digital materiality, material religion, digital embodiment, virtual reality.

Tobias Friesen

The Precarious Relationship Between Embodiment and Digital Religion

This article presents a critique of the prevalent notion that the digital realm is characterized by a condition of disembodiment and excarnation. In order to substantiate its argument, this article initially presents an example of the discourse surrounding the disembodiment thesis, namely Richard Kearney's considerations of touch in the digital age. In this context, the article uncovers a dominant discursive framing of harmonization vs. over-problematization. It then proceeds to examine the work of Thomas Fuchs and his phenomenological critique of virtuality, which also emphasizes the aspect of disembodiment. Lucy Osler presents a counterargument to the thesis of disembodiment, simultaneously contributing to both

phenomenological and embodiment research. Following Osler, this article argues that embodiment is inherently precarious and that the digital sphere requires a theory of multiple modes of embodiment rather than the creation of a dichotomy between embodiment and the digital. The article concludes with some theoretical considerations of digital religion and theological reflections on the possibility of an online Eucharist, a topic that was prevalent in Christian theology during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: embodiment, disembodiment, phenomenology, digital religion.

Antje Roggenkamp

Presenting, (Re)Constructing and Arranging Medieval Artefacts from Non-religious and Religious Contexts: Challenges in the Digital Age

The influence of digitalised images on individual and societal life has become considerable. The digital media revolution exercises a particular impact on the way we engage with works of art. In contrast to other educational institutions, museums structure the relationship to the past primarily through the arrangement of objects and artefacts, and they ensure that religious and non-religious cultural heritage is preserved.

However, the emergence of digital technologies is changing the self-image of museums. Even though digital copies are playing an important role for presenting medieval artefacts, there are still hardly any criteria to determine their use in museums. In this regard, the present study begins with a practice-orientated re-reading of Walter Benjamin's classic essay "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility". Benjamin's essay focuses on the aura of an original work of art, which changes when it is technologically reproduced. In a practice-orientated re-reading, Benjamin's aura can be considered from different aspects: as practices of describing, seeing and comparing. From this perspective, a deeper re-reading takes these practices as a starting point for developing further criteria: modes of presenting, (re)constructing and arranging. As a result, the application of these practices and criteria opens up new perspectives not only for engaging with works of art and their technologically reproduced copies, but also for digital copies.

Two case studies will be used to examine whether and to what extent the criteria gained by re-reading Benjamin's essay are suitable for facilitating the accessibility of artefacts through digital copies. The chosen artefacts date from the period

to which Benjamin ascribes the largest dense aura – the Middle Ages: the Bayeux Tapestry and the Halderner Altar.

Keywords: practice-theoretical approach, (religious) works of art, original artefacts, Bayeux Tapestry, Halderner Altar, (religious) materiality, digital copy, mechanical produced copy.

Aída Velasco Morla

How Is TikTok #Interreligious? An Inductive Thematic Analysis

This study analyzes how TikTok allows users to make interreligious practices visible and share them, highlighting the coexistence between different religious traditions. Through the platform, creators showcase scenes of daily coexistence, interreligious events, and mixed ceremonies, while also denouncing the discrimination and disapproval associated with interreligious relationships. Three main themes were developed using inductive thematic analysis: Interreligious Sentimental Relationships (67.9%), Interreligious Experiences (21.8%), and Interreligious Facts and Information (10.3%).

The study suggests that TikTok acts as a space for self-representation and interreligious connection through the hashtags #interreligious and #interfaith, overcoming echo chambers and increasing the visibility of interreligious content. The creation of religious content on TikTok materializes faith and expands the individual-group-Sacred interaction to a global environment, where religious practices are shared and reinterpreted.

Keywords: interreligious, interfaith, TikTok, thematic analysis, diversity.

Tijana Rupčić

Deus Ex Machina: Exploring Theological Implications of AI in Video Game Narratives

The study of artificial intelligence (AI) and religion, particularly the concept of God within video games, is a rich field that explores how digital spaces can reflect and shape philosophical and theological discourses. Ever since their first introduction to the public, video games have often been a unique medium for exploring

complex narratives and are tied to the different expressions of religion and spirituality. The integration of AI characters or deities into video games challenges the traditional understanding of divinity and intelligence.

This article examines the imaginaries of AI and God in two video games, *Galerians* (1999) and *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* (1995), focusing on how these elements are used to construct narrative worlds and reflect cultural perceptions of technology and the divine. In these games, the AI characters that gained consciousness started embodying god-like characteristics, such as omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence, raising questions about free will, predestination, and the nature of consciousness. These representations draw from existing religious traditions while also pushing the boundaries of theological thought, suggesting new interpretations of divinity in the context of advanced technology. The article will also closely examine the concepts of emotions that AIs in *Galerians* and *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* “experience.”

The author relies on a game-immanent approach through detailed analysis of the aforementioned games in order to explore how the imaginaries of AI and God converge, offering insights into the evolving relationship between humanity, technology, and spirituality.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, video games, spirituality, *Galerians*, *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*.

Nadja Furlan Štante

*Women's Environmental Peacebuilding – From the Lense of Post-colonial
Theological Ecofeminism*

In a broader context, this paper focuses on the need to address environmental issues and include women's voices and actions in the context of interreligious dialogue – more specifically, to create a venue for women's engagement in environmental peacebuilding through interreligious encounters and dialogue. First, the phenomenon of religious environmental peacebuilding is introduced as an emerging field that views conflicts over environmental resources (environmental injustice) as an opportunity for the conflicting parties to cooperate with one another and ultimately work toward a lasting and sustainable peace. A brief overview of two examples of good practices of women's movements for environmental peacebuilding (Navdanya and the Green Belt Movement) and their contributions are briefly analyzed. From this perspective, the question arises: is Western Christian ecotheology listening to the ecotheological perspectives and practices of the Global

South? Furthermore, it addresses the importance of including women's voices and actions (from the Global South and the Global North for mutual enrichment), which are often left out of interreligious dialogue, but could also find their place in religious (environmental) peacebuilding. This paper follows the ecofeminist thesis that the exploitation of the earth (ecological crisis) is closely linked to the marginalization, exploitation, and abuse of women. From this perspective, perceptions and critical perspectives of environmental injustice and the importance of women's engagement in environmental interreligious peacebuilding are brought together.

Keywords: interreligious dialogue, ecofeminism, ecological justice, environmental peacebuilding.

Primož Krašovec, Anja Zalta

Religious Diversity and the Problem of Systemic Racism in the Context of Global Migration: A Case Study of Tunisia's Treatment of Sub-Saharan Black Christians

The article is based on several months of research into the process of racialisation of sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia. The starting point of our research is the speech of Tunisian President Kais Saied in February 2023. In light of the new negotiations with the EU on support for migration management in the Mediterranean, the president emphasised how important it is for Tunisia to be and remain Arab and Muslim. The sub-Saharan migrants who come to Tunisia are black, many of them are also Christians. The Tunisian case of racialisation of migrants is similar to the dynamics of systemic racism in EU. Our thesis is that racialisation is part of a more complex dynamic determined by the capitalist mode of production, which, due to its internal contradictions, simultaneously demands and excludes human labor power. We argue that the permanently excluded represent a surplus population that, because it is not disciplined by capitalist markets, is considered dangerous and thus falls under the jurisdiction of the police. This process of policing surplus populations represents contemporary systemic racism, with »race« being the result of said process and not determined by its biological, religious, ethnic, or cultural characteristics. We support our thesis with a field study. It consists of qualitative interviews with Tunisian experts and three personal narrative interviews with sub-Saharan migrants from Cameroon.

Key words: black Christians, religious diversity, sub-Saharan Africans, religion, surplus populations, systemic racism, migration, the Tunisian case.

POVZETKI

Victoria Dos Santos, Eduardo Rodrigues da Cruz

Materialnost, religija in digitalno: teoretično preučevanje materialne religije in potopitvenih platform

V članku zagovarjamo, da je materialnost religije moč izraziti in izkusiti na spletu. Ker je religija utelešen pojav, ki se naslanja na snovne elemente, bomo s preučevanjem verskih praks, ki se odvijajo na potopitvenih virtualnih platformah, ugotavljali, kako se ta materialnost kaže pri uporabnikih v njihovem vsakdanjem življenju. V okviru teoretične analize predpostavljamo, da lahko tridimenzionalni navidezni družbeni svetovi učinkovito omogočajo uporabnikom doživljanje ključnih materialnih vidikov, kot sta telesnost in prostor, saj zagotavljajo visoko raven potopitve, interaktivnosti in dejavnosti z utelešenjem v avatarjih v prilagojenih prostorih. Preko teorije mediatizacije Birgit Meyer, teorijo tretjih prostorov digitalne religije Hooverja in Echchaibija ter teorij religiozno-druženega oblikovanja digitalnih tehnologij (RSST) Heidi Campbell bomo razpravo osredinili na vprašanje, kako posamezniki in skupnosti izražajo in doživljajo religijo skozi različne prakse mediatizacije, in prikaz, kako digitalni mediji pridobivajo bolj emotivne pomen, kadar so vključeni v religiozne dejavnosti.

Ključne besede: digitalna religija, digitalna materialnost, materialna religija, digitalna utelešenost, navidezna resničnost.

Tobias Friesen

Krhki odnos med utelešenostjo in digitalno religijo

Avtor v članku kritično obravnava prevladujoče mnenje, da digitalni svet zaznamuje stanje breztelesnosti in iztelesenosti oziroma ločenosti od telesa. V podkrepitev svojih argumentov najprej analizira enega izmed diskurzov, povezanih s tezo o breztelesnosti, in sicer razmišljanja Richarda Kearneyja o dotiku v digitalni dobi. V tej analizi izpostavi prevladujoči diskurzivni vzorec harmonizacije na eni strani in pretiranega problematiziranja na drugi. Nato obravnava delo Thomasa Fuchsa, ki v svoji fenomenološki kritiki virtualnosti prav tako poudarja vidik brez-

telesnosti. Lucy Osler podaja protiargument tezi o breztelesnosti, s čimer hkra-
ti bogati tako fenomenološke raziskave kot raziskave o breztelesnosti. Po zgledu
Osler avtor zagovarja stališče, da je utelešenost inherentno krhka in da bi bila di-
gitalnemu svetu bolj kot ustvarjanje dihotomije med utelešenostjo in digitalnim
potrebna teorija o različnih modusih utelešenosti. V zaključku avtor poda nekaj te-
oretičnih razmislekov o digitalni religiji in teoloških refleksij o možnosti spletnega
obhajanja, kar je bila v krščanski teologiji med pandemijo covida-19 pogosta tema.

Ključne besede: utelešenost, breztelesnost, fenomenologija, digitalna religija.

Antje Roggenkamp

*Predstavljanje, (re)konstruiranje in postavitve srednjeveških artefaktov iz
nereligioznih in religioznih kontekstov: izzivi v digitalni dobi*

Vpliv digitaliziranih podob na življenje posameznika in družbe je danes že zelo
izrazit. Revolucija digitalnih medijev še posebno spreminja način, kako spozna-
vamo in doživljamo umetniška dela. Za razliko od drugih izobraževalnih ustanov
muzeji strukturirajo odnos do preteklosti pretežno preko razpostavitve predmetov
in artefaktov ter skrbijo za ohranjanje tako religiozne kot nereligiozne kulturne
dediščine.

S pojavom digitalnih tehnologij se samopodoba muzejev spreminja. Čeprav
imajo digitalne kopije pomembno vlogo pri predstavljanju srednjeveških artefak-
tov, še vedno ni skoraj nobenih kriterijev, ki bi urejali njihovo uporabo v muze-
jih. Raziskavo zato začnemo s praktično naravnano reinterpretacijo klasičnega
eseja Walterja Benjamina »Umetniško delo v času svoje tehnične reprodukcije«. *Benjaminov esej* poudarja avro izvirne umetnine, ki s tehnično reprodukcijo blede. V praktično naravnani reinterpretaciji lahko Benjaminovo avro obravnavamo z različnih vidikov: kot prakse opisovanja, ogledovanja in primerjanja. V poglobljenem ponovnem branju njegovega eseja v tej perspektivi jemljemo te prakse kot izhodišče za razvijanje dodatnih kriterijev, ki vključujejo načine predstavljanja, (re)konstrukcije in postavitve. Uveljavljanje teh praks in kriterijev tako odpira nove vidike ne le doživljanja umetniških del ter njihovih mehanskih reprodukcij, temveč tudi digitalnih kopij.

Z dvema študijama primerov bomo preverili, ali in v kolikšni meri kriteriji, izpeljani iz nove razlage Benjaminovega eseja, ustrezajo večji dostopnosti artefak-
tov preko digitalnih kopij. Izbrani umetnini izvirata iz obdobja, ki mu Benjamin

pripisuje najbolj zgoščeno avro – srednjega veka. To sta tapiserija iz Bayeuxa in oltar iz Halderna.

Ključne besede: praktično-teoretični pristop, (religiozna) umetniška dela, izvirni artefakti, tapiserija iz Bayeuxa, oltar iz Halderna, (religiozna) materialnost, digitalna kopija, mehanska kopija.

Aída Velasco Morla

Kako je TikTok #medreligijski? Induktivna tematska analiza

Avtorica v raziskavi preučuje, kako TikTok omogoča svojim uporabnikom izražanje in izmenjevanje medreligijskih praks ter sodelovanje v njih, pri čemer poudarja sožitje različnih verskih tradicij. Ustvarjalci na tej platformi predstavljajo prizore vsakodnevnega sobivanja, medverske dogodke in mešane obrede, obenem pa razkrivajo diskriminacijo in neodobravanje, povezano z medverskimi odnosi. Na podlagi induktivne tematske analize vsebin je avtorica opredelila tri glavne teme: medverske čustvene odnose (67,9 %), medreligijske izkušnje (21,8 %) ter medreligijska dejstva in informacije (10,3 %).

Raziskava kaže, da TikTok deluje kot prostor za samopredstavitev in medreligijsko povezovanje prek ključnikov #medreligijski in #medverski, s čimer presega vlogo zgolj odmevne komore in povečuje prepoznavnost medreligijskih vsebin. Ustvarjanje verskih vsebin na TikToku materializira vero in širi interakcijo med posameznikom, skupnostjo in Svetim v globalno okolje, kjer se verske prakse izmenjujejo in na novo tolmačijo.

Ključne besede: medreligijski, medverski, TikTok, tematska analiza, raznovrstnost.

Tijana Rupčić

Deus ex machina: preučevanje teoloških implikacij umetne inteligence v narativih videoiger

Študije umetne inteligence in religije, zlasti koncepta Boga v videoigrah, predstavlja bogato raziskovalno področje, ki preučuje, kako digitalni prostori odražajo in sooblikujejo filozofske in teološke diskurze. Videoigre so že vse od svojega na-

stanka edinstven medij za raziskovanje kompleksnih narativov, ki je povezan za različnimi izrazi religije in duhovnosti. Vključevanje likov umetne inteligence ali božanstev v videoigre postavlja na preizkušnjo tradicionalno razumevanje božanskosti in inteligence.

Avtorica v članku preučuje imaginarija umetne inteligence in Boga v dveh videoigrah, *Galerians* (1999) in *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* (1995), pri čemer se posveča zlasti vprašanju, kako se ti elementi uporabljajo za oblikovanje pripovednih svetov in kako odražajo kulturna doživetja tehnologije in božanskega. V obeh igrah so liki umetne inteligence, ki so pridobili zavest, začeli utelešati božanske lastnosti, kot so vsemogočnost, vsevednost in vseprisotnost, kar odpira vprašanja o svobodni volji, predestinaciji in naravi zavesti. Te upodobitve se naslanjajo na obstoječe verske tradicije, hkrati pa širijo meje teološke misli in nakazujejo nove interpretacije Boga v kontekstu napredne tehnologije. V članku je tudi podrobno preučeno pojmovanje čustev, ki jih umetna inteligenca v videoigrah *Galerians* in *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* "občuti."

S podrobno analizo igranja lastnih elementov in notranje zasnove avtorica ugotavlja, kako se imaginarija umetne inteligence in Boga zblížujeta, s čimer ponudi vpogled v razvijajoči se odnos med človeštvom, tehnologijo in duhovnostjo.

Ključne besede: umetna inteligenca, videoigre, duhovnost, Galerians, I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream.

Nadja Furlan Štante

Ekološko mirovništvo žensk – skozi prizmo postkolonialnega teološkega ekofeminizma

V širšem kontekstu se članek osredotoča na sintezo okoljskih vprašanj ter vključevanja glasov in ukrepov žensk v okviru medreligijskega dialoga – natančneje, na ustvarjanje kreativnih prostorov za sodelovanje žensk v procesu ekološke izgradnje miru preko medreligijskih srečanj in dialoga. Najprej je predstavljen fenomen ženske religijske izgradnje ekološkega miru (ženskega ekološkega mirovništva) kot nastajajočega področja, ki konflikte glede okoljskih virov (okoljsko nepravilnost) obravnava kot priložnost, da sprte strani medsebojno sodelujejo in si na koncu skupaj prizadevajo za trajnostni mir. Nato sledi kratek pregled dveh primerov dobrih praks ženskih gibanj religijske izgradnje ekološkega miru (Navdanya in Green Belt Movement) in analiza njihovega doprinosa.

S tega vidika se zastavi vprašanje: ali zahodna krščanska ekoteologija upošteva ekoteološke perspektive in dobre prakse globalnega juga? Pri tem je izpostavljen pomen vključevanja žensk (z globalnega juga in globalnega severa za medseboj-

no obogatitev) v medkulturne in medreligijske ekološke iniciative. Članek sledi ekofeministični tezi, da je izkoriščanje narave (ekološka kriza) tesno povezano z marginalizacijo, izkoriščanjem in zlorabo žensk. S te perspektive so združene zaznave in kritični pogledi na ekološko (ne)pravičnost ter pomen vključevanja žensk v ekološko medreligijsko mirovništvo.

Ključne besede: medreligijski dialog, ekofeminizem, ekološka (ne)pravičnost, ekološko mirovništvo žensk.

Primož Krašovec, Anja Zalta

Religijska raznolikost in problem sistemskega rasizma v okviru globalnih migracij: študija primera tunizijske obravnave podsaharskih temnopoltih kristjanov

Članek temelji na večmesečni raziskavi procesa rasizacije podsaharskih migrantov v Tuniziji. Izhodišče naše raziskave je govor tunizijskega predsednika Kaisa Saieda iz februarja 2023. V okviru novih pogajanj z EU o podpori pri upravljanju migracij v Sredozemlju je predsednik poudaril, kako pomembno je, da Tunizija je ter ostane arabska in muslimanska. Podsaharski migranti, ki v velikem številu prihajajo v Tunizijo, so temnopolti. Številni med njimi so tudi kristjani. Tunizijski primer rasizacije migrantov je podoben dinamiki sistemskega rasizma v evropskih državah. Naša teza je, da je rasizacija del kompleksnejše dinamike, ki jo določa kapitalistični način produkcije, ki zaradi svojih notranjih protislovij hkrati zahteva in izloča človeško delovno silo. Trdimo, da so trajno izločeni presežno prebivalstvo, ki zaradi tega, ker ga kapitalistični trgi ne disciplinirajo, velja za nevarno, zato spada pod policijsko pristojnost. Ta proces policijskega obvladovanja presežnih populacij predstavlja sodobni sistemski rasizem kot poseben način državne politike, pri čemer je »rasa« rezultat omenjenega procesa ter ni določena s svojimi biološkimi, verskimi, etničnimi ali kulturnimi značilnostmi. Svojo tezo podpremo s terensko študijo. Sestavljajo jo kvalitativni intervjuji s tunizijskimi strokovnjaki in trije osebni pripovedni intervjuji s podsaharskimi migranti iz Kameruna.

Ključne besede: temnopolti kristjani, religijska raznolikost, podsaharski Afričani, religija, presežno prebivalstvo, sistemski rasizem, migracije, tunizijski primer.

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Victoria Dos Santos holds a PhD in semiotics and media from the University of Turin in Italy and a master's degree in journalism from the University of Barcelona and Columbia University. Her main areas of research include digital religion, pagan studies, new animism, and contemporary human-computer hybridizations. She is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo with a project on the phenomenon of digital religion in Brazil, especially on immersive platforms.

Victoria Dos Santos Bustamante je doktorirala iz semiotike in medijev na Univerzi v Torinu, na Univerzi v Barceloni in Univerzi Columbia v ZDA pa je pridobila tudi magistrski naziv iz novinarstva. Njena glavna raziskovalna področja so digitalne religije, študij o poganstvu, novi animizem ter sodobne hibridizacije človeka in računalnika. Trenutno se v okviru podoktorskega študija na Papeški katoliški univerzi v São Paulu posveča projektu o pojavu digitalne religije v Braziliji, zlasti na potopitvenih platformah.

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Eduardo Rodrigues da Cruz teaches Religious Studies at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, and holds advanced degrees in both physics and theology. He has published works in several languages on the relationship between religion and science, the epistemology of the study of religion, on transhumanism, and on the humanness of AI.

Eduardo Rodrigues da Cruz poučuje religiologijo na Papeški katoliški univerzi v São Paulu. Dosegel je magisterij iz fizike in doktorat iz teologije. Je tudi avtor del o odnosu med religijo in znanostjo, epistemologiji religiologije, transhumanizmu ter človeškosti umetne inteligence, ki so izšla v več jezikih.

TOBIAS FRIESEN

Tobias Friesen is a PhD student at the Department of Theology at Heidelberg University. He holds a B.A. in Protestant Theology and an M.A. in Christianity and Culture/Philosophy. He is currently working on his dissertation on embodied emotions. His research focuses on emotion and embodiment studies, as well as theological anthropology and the contemporary philosophy of religion. He is also a member of the DFG research project Religion and the Emotions.

Tobias Friesen je doktorski študent na Oddelku za teologijo Univerze v Heidelbergu. Diplomiral je iz protestantske teologije, magistriral pa iz krščanstva in kulture/filozofije. Trenutno pripravlja doktorsko disertacijo iz teme utelešenih čustev. Raziskovalno se posveča študijam čustev in utelešenosti ter teološki antropologiji in sodobni filozofiji religije. Sodeluje tudi v raziskovalnem projektu »Religije in čustva«, ki ga podpira DFG, Nemška raziskovalna fundacija.

ANTJE ROGGENKAMP

Dr Antje Roggenkamp is a full professor of practical theology and religious education at the Faculty of Protestant Theology in Münster. After studying Protestant theology and Romance studies in Münster, Paris and Göttingen, she received her doctorate in theology with a thesis on biblical hermeneutics in the works of André Gide. Her habilitation thesis was about the beginning of religious education in German-speaking countries. Her current research focuses on religious co-operation pedagogy, religious materiality and practice theory.

Antje Roggenkamp je redna profesorica praktične teologije in verske vzgoje na Evangeličanski teološki fakulteti v Münstru. Po študiju protestantske teologije in romanistike v Münstru, Parizu in Göttingenu je doktorirala iz teologije z disertacijo o biblični hermenevtiki v zgodbah Andréja Gida. V habilitacijski disertaciji se je ukvarjala z začetki verske vzgoje v nemško govorečih deželah, trenutno pa se raziskovalno posveča pedagogiki verskega sodelovanja, verski materialnosti in teoriji prakse.

AÍDA VELASCO MORLA

Aída Velasco Morla is a psychologist from the Pontifical University of Salamanca, specialized in the social branch, and holds a master's degree in Religious Sciences from the Complutense University of Madrid. She works primarily as a

scientific communicator at the Scientific Culture Unit of the Catholic University of Ávila, where she is also a researcher in the TEHIPACD research group. Additionally, she serves as the Director of the Program on Interreligious Dialogue and New Technologies at the Canadian Foundation for Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Initiatives (FIIDI) and has nearly two years of experience working for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Since 2023, she has been a PhD candidate, awarded with a scholarship, in the Innovation in Social Sciences program at the Pontifical University of Salamanca, focusing her research on religious freedom, interreligious dialogue, and new technologies. She has been a researcher at the Institute of European Studies and Human Rights of the Pontifical University of Salamanca since 2021 where worked as a research assistant at the beginning of her career.

Aída Velasco Morla je psihologinja, specializirana za socialno področje, zaposlena na Papeški univerzi v Salamanci. Magistrski študij iz religiologije je zaključila na Univerzi Complutense v Madridu. Trenutno dela predvsem kot komunikator-ka znanosti na Oddelku za znanost in kulturo Katoliške univerze v Avili, kjer je tudi članica raziskovalne skupine TEHIPACD. Poleg tega je direktorica programa za medverski dialog in nove tehnologije pri Kanadski fundaciji za medkulturni in medverski dialog (FIIDI) in ima skoraj dve leti izkušenj z delom na Visokem komisariatu Združenih narodov za begunce (UNHCR). Od leta 2023 je doktorska kandidatka s štipendijo v programu Inovacije v družboslovju na Papeški univerzi v Salamanci, kjer raziskuje versko svobodo, medverski dialog in nove tehnologije. Od leta 2021 deluje kot raziskovalka na Inštitutu za evropske študije in človekove pravice Papeške univerze v Salamanci, kjer je na začetku kariere delala kot mlada raziskovalka.

TIJANA RUPČIĆ

Tijana Rupčić is a Ph.D. candidate in Comparative History at the Central European University, specializing in the intersection of technology and culture in East European studies. Her recent publications focus on religious and dystopian themes in video games, with articles such as “Techno-Religion and Cyberspace Spirituality in Dystopian Video Games” in *Religions* and a study of “The Religious Cult of the Seraphites in The Last of Us Part II,” published in *The Last of Us and Theology: Violence, Ethics, Redemption*, Lexington Books/Fortress Academic. She also explores environmental themes in gaming, with her upcoming work on pandemic and mass extinction in *Death Stranding*.

Tijana Rupčić je doktorandka primerjalne zgodovine na Centralni evropski univerzi, kjer se raziskovalno posveča prepletu tehnologije in kulture v vzhodno-evropskih študijah. V ospredju njenih novejših objav so religiozne in distopične teme v videoigrah, denimo v članku »Techno-Religion and Cyberspace Spirituality in Dystopian Video Games«, objavljenem v reviji *Religions*, in v študiji »The Religious Cult of the Seraphites in The Last of Us Part II, ki je kot del zbornika *The Last of Us and Theology: Violence, Ethics, Redemption*, izšla pri založbi Lexington Books/Fortress Academic. Avtorica raziskuje tudi okoljske teme v igričarstvu; trenutno pripravlja delo, v katerem obravnava pandemijo in množično izumrtje v videoigri *Death Stranding*.

NADJA FURLAN ŠTANTE

Dr Nadja Furlan Štante is Principal Research Associate and Full Professor of Religious Studies at the Science and Research Centre Koper. Her current research interests are women's religious studies, ecofeminism, and interreligious dialogue.

Dr. Nadja Furlan Štante je znanstvena svetnica in redna profesorica religijskih znanosti na Znanstveno-raziskovalnem središču Koper. Fokus njenega znanstveno-raziskovalnega dela je osredinjen na ženske religijske študije, ekofeminizem in medreligijski dialog.

PRIMOŽ KRAŠOVEC

Primož Krašovec is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, where he teaches courses on epistemology, ideology, theory of technology and digital cultures. His current research areas are: capitalist automation and real subsumption; artificial intelligences; and new media cultures. In 2021 he published his first book *Tujost kapitala* [*Alien Capital*].

Primož Krašovec je docent na Oddelku za sociologijo Filozofske fakultete Univerze v Ljubljani, kjer predava predmete o epistemologiji, ideologiji, teoriji tehnologije in digitalnih kulturah. Njegova trenutna raziskovalna področja so: kapitalistična avtomatizacija in realna subsumpcija, umetne inteligence in nove medijske kulture. Leta 2021 je izdal svojo prvo knjigo *Tujost kapitala*.

ANJA ZALTA

Anja Zalta is an Associate Professor of Sociology of religion at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, and a guest lecturer at FER in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as at the Institute of Science Innovation and Culture (Rajamangala University, Bangkok).

Her research work focuses on the issue of Islam in Europe, intellectual heritage and the rights of religious minorities, gender and religion, religious studies with an emphasis on Asian paradigms, violence and religious identities, and the possibility of transformations of religious conflicts. Within the framework of the Heritage of the Middle East project group, it became more closely connected with the Ain Shams University in Cairo and the Bibliotheca Alexandrini in Alexandria. Istanbul and the University of Van (Department of Sociology).

Anja Zalta je izredna profesorica za sociologijo religije na Oddelku za sociologijo Filozofske fakultete Univerze v Ljubljani, gostujoča predavateljica na FER v Sarajevu, Bosna in Hercegovina, in na Institute of Science Innovation and Culture (Rajamangala University, Bangkok). Njeno raziskovalno delo se osredinja na vprašanje islama v Evropi, intelektualne dediščine in pravic religijskih manjšin, spola in religije, primerjalne religiologije s poudarkom na azijskih paradigmah, nasilja in religijskih identitet, ter možnosti transformacij religijskih konfliktov. V okviru projektne skupine Dediščina Bližnjega vzhoda se je tesneje povezala z Univerzo Ain Shams v Kairu in Bibliotheco Alexandrini v Aleksandriji, v okviru raziskovanja geopolitičnih izzivov, sociokulturnih, zgodovinskih in filozofskih tokov pri razumevanju in implementaciji intelektualne in materialne dediščine pa sodeluje z Univerzo Marmara v Istanbulu in Univerzo Van (Oddelek za sociologijo).

P O L I G R A F I

doslej izšlo / previous issues:

- Hermetizem • Religija in psihologija – Carl Gustav Jung*
Mislec neskončnosti Giordano Bruno • Logos in kozmos
Panteizem
- O Božjem bivanju • 2000 po Kristusu • Mesijanska zgodovina*
Sebstvo in meditacija • Religija in umetnost podobe
Protestantizem • Nikolaj Kuzanski
Renesančne mitologije • Ples življenja, ples smrti
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O ljubezni • Ameriška filozofija religije
Poetika in simbolika prostora • Mistika in literatura
Solidarity and interculturality • Šamanizem
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Mediterranean lectures in philosophy • Svoboda in demokracija
Človekove pravice
Ethical gestures • Krogotok rojstva in smrti
Natural history • Modeli sveta
Bodily proximity • Država in moralnost
Living with consequences • Mistika in misel
Duhovnost žensk na Slovenskem • Poesis of Peace
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Identiteta Evrope • “borders/debordering”
Islam and democracy • Religions and Dialogue
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Kršćanstvo in marksizem • Contemporary Muslim-Christian Encounters
Understanding Ethnic, Religious and Cultural Minorities in Turkey • Religija in narava / Religion and Nature
Transplanted Buddhism in and from Southeast Asia • Religijska in mitološka simbolika v vzhodnoazijski umetnosti
Revisiting Dreams • Air and Breath in Religions and Philosophies
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M A T E R I A L R E L I G I O N A N D T H E D I G I T A L

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Tobias Friesen: *The Precarious Relationship Between Embodiment and Digital Religion*

Antje Roggenkamp: *Presenting, (Re)Constructing and Arranging Medieval Artefacts from Non-religious and Religious Contexts: Challenges in the Digital Age*

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Primož Krašovec, Anja Zalta: *Religijska raznolikost in problem systemskega rasizma v okviru globalnih migracij: študija primera tunizijske obravnave podsaharskih temnopoltih kristjanov*

