CYBER-SPIRITUALITY
AS A NEW FORM OF RELIGION?

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Abstract

In this paper, the author is studying the existence of spirituality in media (cyber-spirituality), taking as an example the videogame called World of Warcraft. He states that cyber-spirituality does exist, though it takes a different form from the traditional religion. Cyber-spirituality favours especially the mental 'submerging' into cyberspace and experiencing a new, magical and fascinating world. In traditional religion, human body represents an important component that keeps human in reality and gives him a chance to experience spirituality in broader sense, including direct communication with other people. Beside this, traditional religion in interested in growing spiritually through self-knowing, while knowing is set on constructed images and stories in cyber-spirituality. The only exception that the author was able to find was in techno-shamanism, in which real self-knowledge can exist together with spiritual growth of man. The author states that in spite of the fact that cyber-spirituality does not reach the level of traditional spirituality it can saturate spiritual needs of a hypermodern man, even though it cannot be fully understood as a new form of religion.

Keywords: religion, spirituality, cyber-spirituality, cyber-shamanism, techno-shamanism

1. Introduction

In the second half of 20th century and especially in the last decades, the western society experienced great changes brought by new technologies, chiefly digital technologies [1]. Within them, we can distinguish also important changes in traditional religiosity, concerning refusal of official Church, ceremonies, rituals and similar. On the other hand, there are still numerous approaches and claims that say that the nature of human cannot be deprived of spiritual dimension. M. Eliade even believes that "*sacrum is a component in structure of consciousness*" or "*to be a human being - or become one - means to be spiritual*" [2]. A question then arises – where has the spiritual dimension of modern man, with its sense of *sacrum,* gone? According to Eliade [2, p. 24] spirituality still exists, but is perfectly disguised, or better said – it has identified itself with *profanum.* O.I. Štampach [3] for instance claims that even in the times of

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strong atheisation in the former Soviet Union, or China, there were some pseudo-spiritual practices, such as the First of May festivals, or worshiping Mao Presently, according to T. Halík [4], religions is finding its way into media. He thinks media are taking a whole set of traditional functions found in religion: they offer symbols, interpret world, offer shared experience, but also present feasts and ecstatic experiences.

We will be studying in this paper the actual changing spiritual forms, especially in relation to media sphere. It is concretely the phenomenon of spirituality in cyberspace of digital media (e.g. cyber-spirituality) that we will be studying in two phases: firstly whether there is such a thing as phenomenon of spirituality and secondly - if yes, what it shares with traditional spirituality, or what differences there are.

2. The term of spirituality

Spirituality, in the general sense of world, means spiritual life, the opposite of material life. In relation to religion, it represents a narrower definition, concretely its inner experience-based quality. This is the reason why the term spirituality often relates to changed phases of consciousness, which are in contrast with the profane or common phase of consciousness. These phases of consciousness are typical for living through ecstatic experiences (or visions), which are mysterious, magical, sacral, fascinating, but also horrific.

M. Eliade [5] says that every religion typically has a basic structure of holiness (*sacrum*) that is in contrast with profane life (*profanum*). Change from profane to sacral life brings an extraordinary spiritual experience. Eliade for example mentioned the case of patriarch Jacob (Genesis 28.10-22), who fell asleep on his way to Laban and had a dream in which he saw a ladder that angels were climbing up and down with God's promise to Jacob. When he woke up, he spoke of this place as of a horrible place and then he made an altar of the stone on which he had been sleeping. This Bible story has two aspects – the inner aspect and the outside aspect. The first one speaks about internal spiritual experience, which was unusual, transcendent, sacral, and in this case also horrific, while the second aspect, which directly follows the first one, is marking this once usual place, as sacred place. A sacred place, as says Eliade [5, p. 18], is stepping out of the usual homogeneous and amorphous space, it represents the fullness of being, possibly changes itself into the centre of the world, or gate into other worlds. A sacred place is always bound to a sacred time, which represents retrieving the sacred occasion by, for example, ritual reiteration of the original event, occasion or similar. The experience remains the basis of spirituality, experience that represents revelation of something exceptional, sacred, with fascinating or horrifying impression.

If spirituality, or each and every religion, is based on spiritual experiences, or if it is vitalised by them, then mysticism represents such experience-based phenomenon extremely well. Mysticism represents here, in relation to spirituality, even a narrower term and means its most central part. In this respect,

looking inside out, we can specify a certain order: mysticism – spirituality – religion. A part of mysticism, or a part of the mystical road that ends with unity with God (Latin *unio*) is the so-called trance or 'flight of the soul'. Teresa of Avila [6], for example, says this about uplifting of the spirit*: "To return to this sudden rapture of the spirit. The soul really appears to have quitted the body ... She feels that she has been wholly transported into another and a very different region from that in which we live, where a light so unearthly is shown that, if during her whole lifetime she had been trying to picture it and the wonders seen, she could not possibly have succeeded"* We often encounter similar experiences in mysticism. To illustrate this, we can also speak about the mystic of Saint Hildegard of Bingen [7], who had numerous visions during her life: "*I perceive these things through my soul, my unopened eyes, rather than through my real eyes or real ears*".

Thus mystical and spiritual experiences establish the basis for spirituality and every single religion. Spirituality in this sense then represents a new, transcendent space in which the spirit 'travels' and lives through experiences that are mystical, sacred, fascinating or even horrific.

3. The term of cyber-spirituality in the context of the World of Warcraft videogame

Several of the already mentioned authors, for example M. Eliade, O.I. Štampach or T. Halík speak alike as they claim that religion can change its traditional form to reach areas that are not typical for it. The classic example can be seen in media, for example, especially picture-based media, which can generate various kinds of mood and feelings [8], especially those that are tied to entertainment [9], but also support spiritual phenomena in the sense of creating a nicer and more true reality, for example with sports heroes, singers or actors/actresses – gods that are hugely adored [4]. This is the reason why media can also substitute traditional religion, to a certain degree. These are real people here, with real lives that are virtualised or sacralised through media.

The second case is about film stories, videogames and similar, which are fictional but acquire a spiritual, or pseudo-religious nature. There are very successful films such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*. They both share a basic story – fight between good and evil, with a great deal of magic, wizardry and even modern technology. This all creates a new world that manifests mystery and *sacrum*, i.e. spirituality and especially spiritual experience. This phenomenon – experiencing spirituality in media - can be described as cyber-spirituality.

In case of videogames, we witness even more intense experience of cyber-spirituality because the players interfere with the game. They can identify themselves with certain hero who often represents an archetype, they can stand for good or bad, enjoy the captivating sceneries, magic, virtual community and others. Among the videogames, World of Warcraft (WoW) is undoubtedly the most popular one. It was brought by a company called *Blizzard Entertainment* in

2004. Several countries participated to create this videogame, for example the USA, New Zealand, Canada and Mexico, followed by Southern Korea, China, the European Union, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong a year later. Thus the game gained a significant intercultural and interreligious importance because it incorporated various symbolical and mythological elements taken from various cultures of the world. The game is played by some 13 million players from all around the world now, players that identify themselves with different mythological characters and act as positive or negative heroes. Also, it is possible for the community to join and fight against a common foe. The storyline runs in two fictional worlds: Azeroth and Outland/Draenor, Azeroth is composed of four continents: Northrend, Eastern Kingdoms, Kalimdor and Pandaria. Azeroth represent the greatest battlefield, place where two fractions called Alliance and Horde fight each other.

J. Vallikatt wrote a book with the title *Virtually Religious: Myth, Ritual and Community in World of Warcraft* [10], he studied this game and, at certain stage, also played it for three hours a day in the period of three months. Beside this, he interviewed some of the players in various places in India. Vallikatt specifically focused on presence of religious happenings, such as myths, rituals and establishing of communities that are typical also in traditional religions. In the first case, Vallikatt found many myths that are very similar to classic myths. In the introduction to the game, on its web site, he found some background for the story – it showed a mythological character. It was a narrative about the beginning of the world (game) and about the player's role to re-create the world. Or, in case of a new version of the game, he found explanation of the changes that were implemented in the world, usually outbreak of chaos, disruption of the kingdom of Azeroth and the player's quest to establish order. This myth, Vallikatt explains, presents some similarities with what M. Eliade calls 'sacred history'. Eliade adds "A myth describes the sacred history, e.g. original occurrence that happened at the beginning of the time, *ab initio*. To tell the story of sacred history means the same as to reveal a mystery…" [5, p. 64] In the WoW videogame, the fight between 'light' and 'darkness' usually takes places on the mythical *Mount Hyjal,* and usually includes defence of the 'world tree'. Beside cosmogonic myths, there are also various heroic myths. The author [10, p. 76], referring to J. Campbell, speaks about three phases of heroic mythical structure: separation, initiation and return. In the game, the player is transformed to his avatar, who faces various quests at the beginning. If the avatar – hero succeeds, he gets a reward – he reaches higher degrees of skills and gains appreciation from the community. Vallikatt [10, p. 164] notices that myths in WoW constitute an important part of the game and set the way facts are perceived and the world is understood. Moreover, the players identify themselves deeply with their avatars and start to live their lives. Deep identification with avatars is visible for example when one exclaims 'I was killed' rather that 'my avatar was killed'.

Another important part of WoW is in rituals that, according to Vallikatt [10, p. 104], share some features with rituals in religions. He sees rituals in a broader context, as unchanging actions and expressions that repeat in certain sequences. The goal of each of them is to get desirable results. However, there are some rituals in WoW that imitate the primary initiation ritual, which W. Turner [11] describes in three phases: separation, liminal phase and integration. In the phase of separation, the individual is cut from society, in the liminal phase he undergoes internal transformation and in the phase of integration he gets integrated into society again. Vallikatt [10, p. 106] finds the Turner's initiation ritual and especially the liminal phase in the player's transcendence into the sacred empire of the WoW game, or in experimenting with his own identity. Vallikatt [10, p. 108] sees a great deal of rituals in the challenges the player is faced with, in his quests that are based on rules and on ritual ways of succeeding in the missions. Some of the rituals are closely bound to myths, for example the ritual of healing the 'world tree', ritual of player's revival and similar.

Community is, according to Vallikatt, the third part of religion and similarly to the case of religions, community is shaped also in the WoW game. Communities are meant to bring more efficiency to the fight against monsters and against spreading chaos in the players' world. Vallikatt [10, p. 141] points out that the players are naturally attracted into communities to share the experience and values that the game offers. Many of the players express the idea that players' communities are often better than those found in families and religion. One of the players (Muji) even said that the players' community is very real for him and that he was never able to distinguish online playing time and real life.

Vallikatt [10, p. 168] claims that the WoW game offers its players mystery and transcendent experiences, and the player submerges, consciously or unconsciously, into the world that has a religious character. In this respect, the WoW game can offer some spiritual satisfaction and the newly arising cyber-spirituality can offer some spiritual satisfaction for the hyper-modern generation.

4. Comparison between spirituality and cyber-spirituality

Vallikatt [10, p. 68, 167] suggested several times, basing on his own experience with the game and interview with its players, that in experience-based sphere there is no difference between traditional spirituality and cyber-spirituality. The result of this is in the fact that videogames can massively saturate religious needs of the post-modern (or hyper-modern) man, for example in experiencing the sacred, fascination, self-transformation, catharsis, etc. Similarly, M. Highland and G. Yu [12] declare that digital media, especially videogames, can bring spiritual experiences in man, thus they suggest equality between traditional and cyber-spirituality.

Is there then a difference between traditional spirituality and cyber-spirituality? In our approach, we try to scrutiny several arguments to show that there indeed, are some differences. There are some differences that relate to the body and also in the very spiritual or mystical experiences.

4.1. First difference

a) Human body will always determine the basic difference between spirituality and cyber-spirituality, because it is human body that keeps us in reality, holds us in time-space coordinates and offers some more feelings and experiences (for example pain, state of relax and so on) that we cannot receive when we are submerged in cyberspace of a videogame. If we ignored human body, we would lose the foothold that we need to separate virtual and real world. We would not be able to approach the virtual and we would not even know it is virtual because we would have nothing to compare it with. Human body, on the other hand, stays here and so does the ability to distinguish the virtual and real, videogame and real life. If the players said [10, p. 141] videogame was real or even better and more important than life, then it does not mean they wanted to deny the difference between real and virtual world, but more probably they put the virtual in the same level as real, or they even might have assigned a higher value to the virtual.

b) Human body represents a vital realistic principle also in 'face to face' communication, thanks to which we know that communication with other person is real and authentic. The reality and authenticity offers to us for example physical touch and also 'auratic' energy radiation of the body. Neither physical touch nor 'auratic' energy radiation of the body can be conveyed by online communication in cyberspace. This is why spiritual experience in a real religious community should be different and, in real spirituality, also more intense than in an online community, brought by technology.

4.2. Second difference

The difference between traditional spirituality and cyber-spirituality is also in the very realisation of traditional spirituality, which can be understood in the sense of spiritual development of man, as this is certainly not random but has its patterns.

a) It is firstly about the difference between spiritual offer in cyberspace and spiritual development of human as such. The spiritual offer presented by the WoW, for example, is about eclectic and artificially synthesised myths and rituals. The authors of this game implanted perhaps the best components of various religions that they knew to offer intense experience of the game, but spirituality or - said better - cyber-spirituality is enclosed in technological, design-based and story-based offer given by the game. On the other hand, real spirituality is not about artificial synthesis of religion-based ideas, but about the unique spiritual development of human being that is based on recognition of the

self, work with his own mind, ideas, but mainly with his own negative tendencies offered by the sub-conscience. C.G. Jung [13] claims that when consciousness ascends into unconsciousness, collective of individual, we may come across some archetypes; these may be of numinous and sacral character. These archetypes, often found in media and videogames, do not occur randomly, there is a relation with a concrete person, his consciousness, frame of mind, problems and similar.

b) Secondly, higher levels of spirituality are important, the west mysticism [14] describes them as illumination (Latin *illuminatio*) and unification (Latin *unio*). Reaching these levels of consciousness is possible through concentration and meditation – these help to cut the link between consciousness and outer stimulations and turn towards internal stimulation and attention is shifted to one single place (mental of physical) with prospect of the only thing – tranquillisation of the mind. This process is the opposite of what happens when playing video games, where human mind gets bound to the game either through visual or acoustic content. Games such as the WoW often use internal energies known as kundalini and chakras in yoga, but the player does not develop them and therefore cannot reach deeper stages of consciousness, or *unio*, as the western mysticism describes it. Also here, the players' world is closed and isolated from this unique and sacral experience.

5. Special kinds of cyber-spirituality - cyber-shamanism and techno shamanism

Special kinds of cyber-spirituality can be seen in cyber-shamanism and techno-shamanism, where emphasis is put on a more intense connection between human and technologies, for example through specially designed electronic music that helps to reach a state of full submerging into cyberspace. The question is – to what extent these new kinds of shamanism differ spiritually from traditional shamanism?

For traditional shamanism, as claims M. Eliade [15], it is the so-called shaman's initiation that is typical. During this the shaman adept undergoes initiation probation, which is similar to the religions matrix of 'death and resurrection' [16] and which brings personality transformation of the future shaman. He then acquires knowledge and experience that can be used for the benefit of other people (to treat illnesses, for example). However, a shaman applies this knowledge and experience through ecstasy, which represents the second most significant feature of shamanism.

T. McKenna [17], who researched rituals of shamanism, came with the idea of linking new technologies with traditional shamanistic rituals as early as at the end of 1980s. Basing on his own experience with ayahuasca rituals in upper Amazon where, as he says, speech and singing are 'visualised', he thought this experience could be performed through digital media.

Digital media can now fulfil T. McKenna's dream, at least partially. We have had a great deal of technological applications of shamanism in the last 10-15 years. However, not every application of shamanism is the same, we then distinguish two basic types: cyber-shamanism and techno-shamanism. L. Martínková [18] points out that the difference can be seen in degree in which digital technology is used. The fist type is purely about 'submerging' into cyberspace through music and images so that man's perception of time and space fades to zero and he reaches trance just like a real shaman. In the second type, digital technologies only help to practice shamanistic rituals, they are solely auxiliary, for example music. Techno-shamanism then combines digital technology and man's activity – for example rhythmical breathing, prayers, singing and dancing.

In this perspective, cyber-shamanism brings on one hand an intense experience of 'submerging' into the cyberspace, pre-programmed in a way it would resemble real trance in a shaman that uses hallucinogenic drugs, for example. As one cyber shaman [18] expressed – after approximately an hour of intensive submerging into the cyberspace, he lost the idea of time and space and felt totally freed of everything. On the other hand, 'setting' the soul 'free' from the body does not happen in the programmed and therefore artificial world of images, but in the real world where the shaman lives together with his culture. The outcome of this trance is then in spiritual cognition (including cognisance of oneself), which enables him to help other members of community. In cyber-shamanism it is questionable whether this sort of awareness, that could push human spiritually, really occurs.

Techno-shamanism is a completely different case, as it uses digital media merely as tools. In this case trance is reached naturally, since one's conscience submerges into its own 'cyberspace' of the individual or collective unconsciousness. Techno-shamanism has to work with the unconscious contents of the mind similarly to traditional shaman. Working with this contents leads to self-knowing as well as knowing of the spiritual world. In this aspect, the status of authentic spirituality should be granted solely to techno-shamanism, as a variety of cyber-spirituality.

6. Conclusions

To conclude, we can say that certain types of spirituality can indeed be found even in media. We base this finding on studying of religion-based content in media, especially in the videogame named World of Warcraft, in which we can see myths, rituals and communities, just like in religion. However, the most important thing for cyber-spirituality is to experience 'other world' intensively, the world that can be magical, fascinating and that changes players consciousness. Despite similarities, we also find some differences; these determine human body and also higher, spiritual and mystical states. Human body holds us in time and space coordinates and determines what is real, in opposition to virtually - though authentically - experienced world. Body is also

inevitable in face-to-face communication and in auratic radiation of human being, which cannot be achieved through digital media. Within advanced spiritual experience, it is mostly about developing spiritual self-knowledge, which is enclosed in a pre-programmed and therefore basically artificial experience.

A special category found in cyber-spirituality is represented by cyber-spirituality and cyber-shamanism. In the first case, despite similarity with trance in real shamanism, there is a problem with self-knowledge and self-development, as it again uses some pre-programmed space and ideas. The only exception is in case of techno-shamanism, since it uses digital media as additional sources in practicing shamanistic rituals.

We may make a conclusion here that modern cyber-spirituality, with exception of techno-shamanism, does not reach standards of the traditional spirituality and therefore cannot be fully understood as a new form of religion. Despite this, it can saturate into spiritual needs of post-modern (or hyper-modern) man.

However, there is still a question that remains to be answered in the future: how will digital media contribute to further development of man and what influence will they bring on his spiritual experience? We do not know the answer, but it is probable that technology will continue to penetrate human life. This will bring some new challenges for scientific disciplines such as Philosophy, Sociology, Anthropology, Religious science and other, but also for media education - because the right attitude to technologies, especially digital media will have to be found [19].

Acknowledgement

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