

Material and Digital Reality in the World of Religions

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The invasion of digital technology in society has led to a change in the perception of space, time and thinking of modern man, creating a virtual reality. The rapid development of technology in the mid-20th century marked a world-changing moment in the course of human history, decisively affecting almost every aspect of human life. The concepts of space and time are changing dimension, as humanity is entering a “new era” in which communication is freed from space and time constraints. The human ego, through the gateway of a modem, finds an “escape route” from space-time, is freed from the classical laws of physics and enters a world –or rather a “space”– which has more the characteristics of a parallel universe, but without the limitations and constraints of space and time.

With the adventure of technology, the applications of digital knowledge have clearly shown that man is in danger of being wiped out from both nature and history. The autonomous techno-nature does not constitute a field where man is confronted with nature or lives naturally as an organic part of it, since personal and social activities are limited to a virtual field.

Having digital technology as its most important tool, humanity is now on the verge of a new revolution. Thus, an artificial universe of digital data is being constructed, where the ceding of human poetic creativity

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to autonomous intelligent cyber-machines is considered as inevitable. It is essentially a mutation of human life from natural to artificial¹. There has been no other previous era in the history of mankind in which the dominance of technology has been as indisputable as ours. This is because today technology has become a major part of the functioning of man and the world, making not only science, but even art and religion technological².

I. Digital Religion and the Metaverse Universe

The human face becomes a digital persona, which interacts in a virtual space where the boundaries between the real and the imaginary are blurred. The search for God in the digital world and the interactions between believers raise the question of whether the internet is an extension or a substitute for the religious event and experience. If the religious event for all religions is a product of a free society of persons with unique characteristics, then under what conditions can this society of persons be replaced by a digital society?

In fact, we could claim that we are experiencing a gradual shift of the religiosity from the traditional community with ties of communion, faith and physical presence and interaction to online communities, which are characterized by the elements of user anonymity, horizontal relationships without particular hierarchical structures and volatile constitution. Thus, we can observe a transition from real sociality to digital individuality.

The religious presence in the digital world constitutes a vast space of networks and interactions, which extends to every kind of religious

1. For the relevant argumentation, see Hannah Fry, *Hello World: Άνθρωπος στην εποχή του αλγόριθμου*, Papasotiriou Publications, Athens 2020; Fr. Webster and K. Robins, *Η εποχή του τεχνοπολιτισμού: Από την κοινωνία της πληροφορίας στην εικονική ζωή*, transl. Katia Metaxa, Kastaniotis Publications, Athens 2002.

2. f. N. Loudovikos, «Διαλογική (Βιο)τεχνολογία; Τò πρόβλημα της (Βιο)τεχνολογίας ως όριστικής και αμετάπτωτης οὐτοπίας: ἀπὸ τὸν Marx καὶ τὸν Heidegger στὸν Bostrom, τὸν Stuart Russell καὶ τὸ σκοτεινὸ ἄστρο τῆς ἐπιθυμίας», *Θεολογία/Theologia* 92, 1 (2021), pp. 23-50, here p. 25.

belief. This is called “digital religion”; it is a religious practice that transforms and offers new forms of religiosity in the digital world. It was the communicator expert Heidi Campbell who coined the term “digital or online religion” to indicate the types of religious expressions that are emerging through digital technology, as well as the way in which digital religious spaces are being shaped³. The user of a religious website no longer only has access to information on religious content, but he can also participate in religious practices such as prayer, communication with a priest, or confession.

As is nowadays obvious and well known, there are special applications that help believers to learn more about their religious tradition through the screen of their device or mobile phone. The most popular app in the Muslim world is the muslim pocket⁴. In addition to praying with a rosary (tasbīḥ), one can study the Qurʾān, find nearby places of prayer (mosques), as well as orient himself towards Mecca in order to pray, while at the same time finding restaurants that offer food permitted by Islamic law (ḥalāl). There is, of course, a corresponding Christian Orthodox application, in Greek, where the elder Ephraim of Arizona (1928-2022) recites the wish and the electronic counter counts the number of wishes, while using the rosary⁵.

The invasion of the internet into modern man’s daily life has allowed the emergence of innovative forms of religious interaction and the possibility of participating in ritual practices beyond the physical space of their performance. We therefore have an alternative, virtual universe, in which people choose to move, relate and associate, not in their physical existence but through virtual avatars. This is essentially the world of the metaverse, which describes the merging of reality and virtual reality, resulting in augmented reality within social networks. Metaverse is a virtual universe containing a collective virtual shared space where people can interact with a computer-generated environment

3. Heidi A. Campbell, “Intoduction: The rise of the study of digital religion”, in: Heidi A. Campbell (ed.), *Digital Religion Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, Routledge, New York 2013.

4. See, for example: <https://muslim-pocket.en.uptodown.com/android> [9-8-2023].

5. See, for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9L1srCTpIY> [9-8-2023].

and different users. It is an immersive and interconnected digital sphere, combining elements of Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality and the internet⁶. Augmented reality is the real-time direct or indirect viewing of a quasi-physical, real-world environment, the data of which is augmented by elements reproduced by computer devices, such as audio, video, graphics or location data. More specifically, we are dealing here with religious activities, which are taking place only within the boundaries of cyberspace, either as parallel or substitute functions. They are religious activities and experiences, such as ritual services, prayers, but also sacred pilgrimages.

As far as the internet and especially the Metaverse are concerned, the Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) believe that this activity cannot be bad in itself.

From the Christian point of view, several Christian denominations are adopting practices that go beyond simple information – from the organization of online prayer or the sharing of prayers between believers to the possibility of virtual lighting of a candle. As early as the mid-1990s, when the Internet was still in its infancy, the first digital temples and “churches” were appearing. During the first two decades of the 20th century, there has been a more systematic attempt from the users’ side to further adapting their religious needs to the Internet digital data. Obviously, the experiential relationship and connection of the faithful that characterizes parish life does not exist⁷. The value of prayer, sacraments, Holy Communion, confession and mission is lost as mere recording and sharing in the chaotic virtual digital environment⁸.

As it was expected, for Judaism, there are “digital synagogues” (VR Synagogues) and digital sermons, or even ceremonies⁹. However,

6. “The Metaverse: Concepts and Issues for Congress”, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R47224.pdf> [26-7-2023].

7. f. G. D. Metallinos, *Ένορία. Ό Χριστός έν τῳ μέσω ήμῶν*, Apostoliki Diakonia tis Ekklesias tis Ellados Publications, Athens 2012.

8. Ach. B. Papatolios, *Τεραποστολή και έκκοσμίκευση*, Kosmos Publications – Monographs 9, Departement of Pastoral and Social Theology and Christian Culture, Thessaloniki 2020.

9. Il. Sabetai, rabbi, «Προσευχή και θεία κρίση», *Άχιλλίου Πόλις/Achilliou Polis* 7 (May 2022), pp. 471-478.

Hinduism and Buddhism are of particular importance in this regard, because of the special significance that avatars possess in the metaverse. The “avatāras” (Sanskrit, *avatāra*-s) are generally the incarnation, the embodiment of deities on earth¹². In the digital world, avatars are the virtual presence of users; they are able to reconstruct and present themselves as they might want to be.

12. Ap. Michailides, *Τνδουισμός. Καταβολές – Ιστορική πορεία – Βασικές αντίληψεις – Λατρεία*, Kardamitsa Publications, Athens 2022, pp. 130-141.

II. The Challenge Posed by the Artificial Intelligence

The digital religion and the metaverse, a major challenge in the digital world for the world of religions, are linked to the issue of Artificial Intelligence (AI). This is the implementation of computer systems that emulate elements of human behavior, exhibiting intelligence, learning, adaptability, inference, contextual understanding, problem solving, and the ability to gradually become cognitively autonomous¹³. All the above raise concerns from a religious point of view: Will these superintelligent machines, with their enormous capacity for self-improvement and self-development, replace man and shall we now be led to a form of transhumanism¹⁴? Is this a parallel construct to man, since artificial intelligence develops and presents many similarities with human thinking? Are we finally leading ourselves to a technological singularity of dizzying intelligence, which could accidentally or even deliberately destroy the human race in order to meet a higher purpose of domination¹⁵? All these questions are reasonable and

13. More information about the burning issue of AI, see in: S. Russell and P. Norvig, *Τεχνητή Νοημοσύνη: μία σύγχρονη προσέγγιση*, transl. T. Alvas, D. Kartsaklis, F. Skoularikis, Kleidarithmos Publications, Athens 2005; E. Brynjolfsson and A. McAfee, *Η θαυμαστή εποχή της νέας τεχνολογίας. Έργασία, πρόοδος και ευημερία στα χρόνια των έξυπνων τεχνολογιών*, transl. G. Nathanail, Kritiki Publications, Athens 2016; Th. Tasis, *Ψηφιακός άνθρωπισμός. Είkonιστικό υποκείμενο και τεχνητή νοημοσύνη*, Harmos Publications, Athens 2019; R. Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence*, Viking Penguin, New York 1999; A. Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence (1950)", in: B. Jack Copeland (ed.), *The Essential Turing Seminal Writings in Computing, Logic, Philosophy, Artificial Intelligence, and Artificial Life plus The Secrets of Enigma*, Oxford University Press – Clarendon Press, Oxford 2004, pp. 433-460; N. Bostrom, *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014; Y. Wilks, *Artificial intelligence: Modern Magic or Dangerous Future?*, Icon Books Ltd, London 2019.

14. On the question of whether there could be a new digital humanism, see Th. Tasis, *Ψηφιακός άνθρωπισμός...*, *op.cit.*

15. N. Loudovikos, *op.cit.*, p. 37. On the issue of the ethical control of artificial intelligence, see, among others: M. Anderson and Susan L. Anderson, "Machine Ethics: Creating an Ethical Intelligent Agent", *AI Magazine* 28, 4 (2007), p. 15; N. Bostrom and El. Yudkowsky, "The ethics of artificial intelligence", in: K. Frankish and W. M. Ramsey (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Artificial Intelligence*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2014, pp. 316-334; J. Moor, "The Nature, Importance, and Difficulty of Machine Ethics", *IEEE Intelligent Systems* 21, 4 (2006), pp. 18-21, here p. 21.

should concern the world religions¹⁶. These superintelligent machines are very likely to quickly discover human imperfection and understand the limitations of their subservience to humans, seeking their emancipation; by developing super weapons of unimaginable technology and without even being able to take into account the full facts of the reality of the world and of beings (which human intelligence always takes into account), it will be possible to destroy humans in order to exist only for themselves¹⁷.

It is not without significance that pioneers of artificial intelligence are sounding the alarm bell about the dangers of modern technology and stressing that limits must be set. They consider that there is a danger of abolishing human freedom and altering human rights. Elon Musk –an engineer, inventor and the CEO and head of technology design at Tesla– who is investigating the symbiosis of humans and AI, expressed his reservations about the way it is designed. He recently stated that AI has the potential to annihilate human civilization and manipulate public opinion. He therefore suggests that we should implement safety rules regarding AI¹⁸.

The historian and writer Yuval Noah Harari also pointed out that the emergence of AI threatens the survival of human civilization from unpredictable parameters. He believes that it has acquired some remarkable abilities, such as manipulating and generating language – by words, sounds or images; this means that it can easily alter human civilization. He considers, for example, that human rights are not inscribed in the human DNA and are cultural achievements created in the course of human history and legal culture¹⁹. All this can easily be threatened by AI, since intelligent machines can attempt to destroy all the records that are relevant with the legal system of human civilization

16. For a study that investigates the relevant issue from the point of view of Orthodox Theology, see St. Giagkazoglou, «Θεολογία καὶ Τεχνητὴ Νοημοσύνη», *Θεολογία/Theologia* 91, 3 (2020), pp. 95-124.

17. N. Loudovikos, op.cit., p. 37.

18. «Elon Musk: Ἡ τεχνητὴ νοημοσύνη μπορεῖ νὰ ἐξαφανίσει τὴν ἀνθρωπότητα – Πῶς θὰ γίνεи», in: <https://www.moneyreview.gr/>, 01.11.2023 [19-8-2023].

19. Y. N. Harari, «Ἡ τεχνητὴ νοημοσύνη μπορεῖ νὰ καταστρέψει τὸν πολιτισμὸ μας – Πρέπει νὰ σταματήσουμε», in: <https://www.ethnos.gr/>, 04.05.2023 [19-8-2023].

on the digital platform²⁰. He has also pointed out that, in the near future, AI is very likely to control humanity, by constructing new religions that people can follow. The Israeli professor points out that AI through the ChatGPT software could attract believers by creating its own sacred texts²¹, and he observes that we may see the first cults and religions, of which their revered texts will have been written by a non-human mind²².

In his prophetic words, Saint Sophronius of Essex (1896-1993), emphatically points out the dangers for mankind of the construction of robotic machines:

There will be a time when machines will be built that will control the way people think. At that time only those who have lowered their minds to their hearts will be unaffected by this dictatorship. In the West, people live with the brain, that is, they center their lives on reason. So, if scientists discover the right machine, then they will be able to read people's thoughts and direct them. But those who live with the heart, in which the Grace of God is acting, and wholeheartedly pray, they have the seal of the Cross in them and no one can control them spiritually. They are spiritually free²³.

Still, there is another risk: AI's idolization and deification by man. As Neil MacArthur, Director of the Centre for Applied Ethics at the University of Manitoba, notes, we are potentially at the dawn of an era where a new kind of religion or cult is emerging: people will be led into the worship of AI. The latest generation of chatbots, defined by AI, have filled their users with awe and wonder – a similar awe and wonder to that of a believer in the moment of a real religious experience. This raises the question: How can we discern the source of such intense emotional experiences, so that we are in position not to identify the true God with technology's multi-powered machinations, the uncreated nature of God with the created behavior of a man-made condition?

20. Y. N. Harari, «Ἡ τεχνητὴ νοημοσύνη μπορεῖ νὰ καταστρέψει τὸν πολιτισμὸ μας...», op.cit.

21. Y. N. Harari, «Ἡ τεχνητὴ νοημοσύνη θὰ ἐλέγξει τὴν ἀνθρωπότητα φτιάχνοντας νέες θρησκείες», in: <https://www.naftemporiki.gr/>, 03.05.2023 [19-8-2023].

22. Op.cit.

23. Elder Sophrony (Sakharov) of Essex, *Περὶ Προσευχῆς*, Holy Monastery of St. John the Baptist, Essex, England 1993, pp. 12-13.

Such a distinction might not always be self-evident. This is first of all because future believers in such a religion –whose focus of cult will be AI– will see in it the self-evident existence of a higher power with characteristics generally attributed to divine beings. These characteristics are the level of intelligence that AI can demonstrate at any given moment, levels far above and beyond those that the average human being possesses. AI’s inexhaustible creativity will allow it to be able to create a new kind of intelligence, e.g. to compose good music or write a good poem almost instantaneously, but also its apparent detachment from anything purely “human”, such as physical pain, hunger, sexual desire, etc. Moreover, AI can indeed offer guidance and comfort to people on a daily basis and in various ways, from finding the fastest route to work to inventing the right medicine to cure many human diseases. Finally, as another god, AI will appear in awe in the eyes of its faithful as immortal, seemingly transcending the final barrier that separates man from God.

In the context of the AI’s idolization, an attempt is made for the eschatological perspective of religious self-consciousness to be replaced with a digital model²⁴. The eschatological concepts of the Abrahamic religions, such as resurrection, afterlife and immortality, will be transformed in the digital world and disconnected from their post-historical dimension. This has been taking shape in recent years. As is well known, at the end of 2020, Microsoft won the patent for chatbots that “resurrect” the dead, using material from images, voice messages, social network posts, emails, actual letters written and sent, etc., so as to “create a special matrix that relates to the personality of a specific person (who has died)”. Soon after, a company called Project December put on the market a version of just such a matrix of “personalities”, like William, who speaks like Shakespeare. At the same time, it allowed people who mourn their beloved dead to “recreate” them by their “resurrection”.

Among the current protagonists of the AI’s global emergence, opinions are still divided as to whether or not it will soon acquire the features

24. See M. O’Connell, *Ὁ ἄνθρωπος τοῦ μέλλοντος. Ἡ προσπάθεια νὰ ἐπιμηκύνουμε τὴ ζωὴ μας καὶ νὰ λύσουμε τὸ πρόβλημα τοῦ θανάτου*, transl. G. Stamos, Kleidarithmos Publications, Athens 2020; Fr. Damour, *Μακάριοι οἱ θνητοί, γιατί εἶναι ἀκόμη ζωντανοί*, transl. N. Malliaris, Magma Publications, Athens 2018.

of a new religion. At a historical conjecture when intellectual thought is suffering under the yoke of materialistic bliss, the impressive potential of AI raises a fundamental question for man. In front of a dictate for the apparent and virtual immortality of each of us, the urgent question we are called upon to answer is how to preserve our humanity in the face of an ever mutating and perfecting AI, in which it will become increasingly difficult to distinguish between a virtual experience and a real encounter with another human being in the material world. Perhaps we are not far from the moment in the history of humanity when we will have to seriously consider the right of each of us, this time not only to life, but the right to his or her death, accompanied by the need for them to remain –after their death– forever dead.

Apart from the dangers it poses to the human race and the possible replacement of religion, it also creates metaphysical problems. It cannot possess preeminently theological/metaphysical virtues such as love, discernment, relationality, gratitudecompassion, communion and freedom, as well as prayer, i.e. the sense of Divine Grace²⁵. Thus, while AI can accomplish much, the only thing it may not be able to do is to refer to and communicate with the absolute through prayer. It is the religious emotion par excellence, variously expressed in all religious traditions. Consequently, the issue of AI, while at first sight appearing to concern technology in general and the science of IT in particular, it also raises metaphysical and existential questions that are related to the religious realm. The whole issue deserves further study and research.

It has become clear from the above that religions, despite their initial reticence regarding the use of the internet, are nowadays very active and their presence extends from official websites to social networking sites, creating a web of interaction with thousands of users. Nowadays, all religious bodies and agents maintain a significant presence in the digital ecosystem.

Internet is now an acknowledged and accepted reality. From our brief references to the religious presence on the internet it becomes obvious that the major religions have included this medium in their spiritual toolbox. They do not seek to the digital ecosystem's demonization,

25. N. Loudovikos, *op.cit.*, p. 46.

ignoring its positive aspects and the contribution of technology to the improvement of important areas of human activity. Of course, we should not ignore that the virtuality of the digital world is fraught with the danger of disconnection from real life and confusion between the real and the imaginary. After all, the unification of cosmic reality, the disembodiment and the search for liberation from the spatiotemporal constraints are essential aspects of man's transcendental tendencies.

Despite the religions' involvement in the phenomenon of the "digital religion", most of the major religions, both on the basis of written monuments of religious discourse and contemporary approaches, converge on assuming that religion is an experience, a point of reference and cohesion of the religious community and is not limited to the context of the digital world. God is still experienced and seen in the face of our brother and not on the computer screen. Technology must serve man and man must not be subordinated to technology. With the use of technology, man needs to become more useful in the social environment, without ever forgetting that nothing in the world can substitute for a living relationship with God and a living communication with his fellow man and with the real community. He cannot shift his religiosity outside of tangible reality, into the grid of the digital ecosystem.

For Christianity in particular, the digital world poses a new challenge; it requires critical interpretation in order for it to most effectively respond to its pastoral role and to the unabated spread of the gospel message. Through technology, Christianity is called upon to exercise a new form of ministry in the contemporary digital world, to address the evangelical message and to provide the appropriate moral and anthropological conditions for the use of modern technology, and in particular the emerging digital culture. After all, Christianity has shown over time that it can receive and transform any medium that can be put at its service – language, philosophy, art and music²⁶.

26. It is characteristic that during the first four centuries AD the Church did not remain uninvolved and indifferent to the great cosmological problems of each historical period. On the contrary, the theological discourse took up the arsenal of science and philosophy to address those problems, as well as the great questions about the meaning and course of life and history. See Metropolitan of Pergamon John Zizioulas, *Ἐλευθερία καὶ ὑπαρξή. Ἡ μετάβαση ἀπὸ τὸν ἀρχαῖο στὸν χριστιανικὸ Ἑλληνισμό, Πέντε μαθήματα*

According to Christianity, man is free to transform and through this to report to God the whole creation, eucharistically cultivated and transformed by his own work and intervention. Christian faith's great vision is precisely the Eucharistic reference of the world and life to God's life. The Eucharistic act of referring the world to God reveals man's personal relationship with creation. Only man, as God's image, is the sovereign and free person over autonomous nature. As a person but also as a microcosm, encapsulating in his existence the creation in its totality, man can liberate matter from its limitations; from being a vector of death and decay, he can immortalize it through relationship and communion with God. It is a question of whether this can be done in the context of digital transformation.

στο *Ίδρυμα Γουλανδρή-Χόρν* (1983), Domos Publications, Athens 2018. Besides, as it has been rightly said, the use of representations and images that have been taken from various cultural contexts, in order to make doctrinal truths understood by people with a different cultural background is many times not only legitimate but also imperative from the Orthodox point of view. It is a fundamental missionary and pedagogical principle, deeply rooted in the history and life of the Orthodox Church. See G. D. Martzelos, «Θεολογικὸς ἀνιμισμὸς καὶ ὁρθόδοξη Πνευματολογία», in: *Ὁρθόδοξο δόγμα καὶ θεολογικὸς προβληματισμός: Μελετήματα δογματικῆς θεολογίας Α'*, P. Pournaras Publications, Thessaloniki 1993, pp. 133-153, 141-142.