

Technology Versus Religion

The Religious-Tech Adaptation

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Abstract—This papers aims to reflect on the relationship between Religious institutions and new technologies. It seeks to deepen on the idea of the complex 2.0 conversion that most religions experience in today's digital context around the globe.

Keywords-religion; new technologies; digital;media; Net

I. TECHNOLOGY IS NOT THE ENEMY

There is a marketplace of narratives ideas and messages that could not be ignored by religious institutions in the digital age. As Hoover and Kaneva [1] suggest, “today, increasing personal autonomy in faith practice is an additional such pressure, encouraging religions to further relativize to compete in a secular-media-defined marketplace of ideas and discourses. The development of social networking media and web 2.0 cannot help but further exacerbate this trend”.

Religious institutions have come up against new technologies and are now beginning to use them to reshape their message. While initially religions tended to replicate the same narrative strategies they used in the off line world, they are discovering that new environments require new needs and new languages [2]. They are going through a religious-tech adaptation. But it is not a simplistic change involving new abilities to follow the signs of times, but a totally new way of being.

The Net challenges their views, values and beliefs and raises questions like: To whom I am addressing my proclamation?; Who are the faithful receiving my message?; Who I am supposed to interact with, as a religion? With my followers only, or followers that are not engaged, like in an off line community, but could be spread all over the world?

The clearest outline of what we mean by religious-tech adaptation is provided in our definition of digital conversion, that is, a disrupted historical process that is always in motion

with the aim of preserving the core values of the religion while bringing them, testing them and negotiating them in the global sphere of the Net.

Although negotiation is not a favorite word for religious institutions, it is clear to us that in the new context religions find themselves daily (and nightly) exposed to the public. Audiences have become global, not only consisting of churchgoers.

The specific case of the Catholic Church allows us to observe the particular case of Catholicism as an example of what we call “digital conversion” or how new technological contexts have been used as new tools of faith propagation. The Net is the place where religious institutions seek to show themselves in an interactive and participatory way, elements not always so highlighted in the off line religious sphere.

To address the relevance and impact of the new technologies related to religion [3] we become increasingly more concerned with the position that considers that religion is being modeled by the 2.0 vision to the point of changing its essence. But too we see this change not as a radical one but a progressive one. We could be even more ambitious and suggest that religion is also modeling the Net by bringing concepts there, such as engagement, interaction, mystery, utopian places, virtual reality and religious concepts (“saving” for instance is a very technological concept, but it is also the core of the major religions), not to mention that new converts to religion come often from science and the TIC world [4] and they are looking for self-realization, channeling and other experiences that make a strong bond between the practice of a religion and the concept of science and connection (to God, nature, others, himself or herself).

II. RELIGION AS A CHANGING ACTOR

In our research we rarely focus our attention exclusively on the threats that technology brings to religious spheres: we do not think that tech has arrived to cancel religions, but to give them the opportunity to readapt.

Here we consider both trends. On one hand, religion is no longer the same concept as it used to be because rules of engagement on the Net raise big challenges for religious institutions. In particular, for the Catholic Church, the Internet brings limitations (sacramental but not only) but also new ways of expression that compel the organization to adapt to a new dynamic of conversation and public exposure. So its presence is not the same and some old habits have to be abandoned or reshaped. Religion has made a particular contribution to Internet. It has also brought some specific characteristics to the Net, for instance, the strong concept of link (religio, in Latin, stands for link, ri-legare) and a reemerging process of being a community.

Democracy seems to be a sacred term when we talk about the Internet. Religions also struggle to be considered actors in democratic change: freedom, justice and peace are in the mouths of religious leaders every day on the Internet. But they do not reach everywhere: the digital divide is present, not only in terms of Internet access but also because Internet users are overwhelmingly white, male, middle class and concentrated within Western Europe and Northern America. [5].

The global discourse of integrating aspects of humanity in motion with the Net is full of such enthusiasm that it would not be an exaggeration to label it as being religious with Pentecostal accents as a revival movement. [6]. The concept of networked community provides a valuable lens for describing the function of community both online and offline, especially within contemporary Western society. The study of online religious community shows that, rather than living in a single static religious community, people in contemporary society live in religious social networks that are emergent, varying in depth, fluid and highly personalized [7].

Basically two kinds of approach to the 2.0 world are currently being undertaken. Some critics have suggested that the new 2.0 era may reduce the impact of religion. They argue that this is not the time for institutions to be on the Net but for spontaneous communities to create new content and ways of interaction. While this theory could be taken into account, we have focused our attention in the idea that it might be possible to demonstrate that religion also as institution has much to contribute to our understanding of the modern world if it could be related to the digital world. The Holy See, as the example we have examined, is a kind of institution that involves the need to reconnect cultural practices to the new world without losing its authority and hierarchical structure. The case of www.news.va as an effort to be on the Net has to be examined in this sense.

Relationships on the Net are not the main goal of the Catholic presence in Internet. With Facebook you go into the Net, but some scholars consider there is no community [8] construction: "Internet is not the community and the community is not Internet: to be part of a community is

something more confident and solid. In Internet only one click is required for someone to disappear from our life". Interaction is good, but more important for religious institutions is to construct off line bonds.

A comprehensive demographic study of more than 230 countries and territories conducted by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life estimates that there are 5.8 billion religiously affiliated adults and children around the globe, representing 84% of the 2010 world population of 6.9 billion [9]. Religion has an impact and these figures are even more interesting when we consider that the number of Internet searches for the concept of religion is increasing.

III. CONCLUSION

Internet is a place in which things happen all the time, not only because streaming technologies offers us live events, but also because we have the ability to see the same event again, thousand of times. And in this context media events affect the international image of the society in which they take place. Such events increasingly seek an international audience, and are designed to be seen beyond national borders as well [10]. Global and local are a fusion that Internet feeds all the time.

One of our central claims is that new technologies show the way toward a new world. In this environment, power is not assigned to the one having more properties, but having more connections. The Catholic Church is an institution with worldwide connections, and it has a secular background. Tradition is there, connections are there, but innovation could be a factor that causes fear.

We argue that religious clicks, when coming from the Catholic world, are precisely defined by immediate forms of engagement, but those forms are reversible under certain conditions. Engagement in the digital world could be a fragile engagement.

When Columbus arrived in America in the 15th century, women and men acknowledged the world was not how they thought: not even morphologically, politically, socially, culturally, axiologically had changed. We are facing the birth of another civilization, and not understanding that means not being able to understand anything at all and this is a phenomenon that only occurs every millennium. The changes that this new culture brings, rediscovers and creates are innumerable.

In a bureaucratic organization and the Catholic Church is one of these organizations, authority is not nearly so personal or visible most of the time, and that's both positive and negative. It's good in the sense that power gets distributed through a system in a bureaucratic organization, but it's negative (and maddening) in the sense that we can't always tell who's responsible, who made this decision, and why [11]. Off line religion has a clear idea of who is the leader, while on the Net influencers, critics, prosumers... could take on this role without having been given the power to do so.

Religion now it has its place everywhere, not only in limited territories or confined sacred spaces. Internet has also become a space for the sacred. De Vries defines it as the result of the globalization of religion: "The term global religion

indicates just that: for its historical and local origins, religion has increasingly become a global -that is to say a worldwide and de-territorialized phenomenon: abstract of formal, ethereal or virtual, everywhere and nowhere” [12].

As Meyer and Moors recognize, religion has to make an effort to adjust to new styles and formats, and those are not natural in some cases to its essence: “Public religion, while strong, loud and visible, in certain respects faces new challenges by having to adjust to styles and formats not necessarily of its own making” [13].

Helland, bringing the Hindu example, explains that a significant number of temples in diaspora have engaged the Internet and the World Wide Web as a valuable tool for maintaining and promoting their religious tradition. This group also utilizes the Internet for philanthropy, long-distanced ritual practice at wired temples in India, and they were the first group to develop and promote virtual pilgrimages. This constellation of factors means that Hinduism may be experiencing the greatest impact of this technology upon their religious tradition [14].

Fiorentini’s insights are very useful in understanding the angle of the Catholic Church when entering into the Web: when a Catholic uses secular means with the idea of the evangelization, he must be very attached to the rules [15] of those instruments, not aiming to change them because the objective is different. So, if the Net requires images or interaction, the Catholic Church has to adapt itself to the requirements of the Net.

We are not arguing that the whole point of the analysis is the inability of the Church to readapt to new contexts, but a risk in bringing all the traditional methods to the Net exists.

Digital reputation worries religious institutions. The Church and the Church’s institutions create public opinion when they carry out their mission, without bothering to consider their image in the media, and conversely, when they spend too much time considering their image to try to avoid distortions of the Church’s image in the media since these distortions place obstacles in the path of its apostolic mission [16].

A person is what we say about him. It has been always like that, but today more than ever. Digital irruption, apps and social network emergence have led to, in certain domains like politics, academics, medicine, law, architecture, music, art, sport and engineering difficulties in managing the digital reputation, namely, information circulating in the cyberspace which refers to a person, an institution or to an organization.

Religious discourse has to restore a sense of the sacred which can only be imaged through time-tested techniques of double meanings, inversion, and paradox. However, connecting with past vocabularies is not enough. There needs to be a new vocabulary of the sacred that incorporates elements into its style to allow the sacred to resonate with postmodern audiences [17].

Managing the digital reputation has to deal with restoring credibility and the new vocabulary connecting with postmodern sensitivities.

Technology is not an isolated value. Internet and America as a discovery are new worlds that could be understood as novelties that enlarge a universe that seemed closed and even sold out. Although the Net is not a physical territory, it is clear that this intangible innovation has helped to enlarge the action space for individuals, companies and administrations. In this new world to explore, different attitudes may be found: First, the ones that apply the same ethical or moral base they had before the discovery of this new world. A second group tends to adapt attitudes, beliefs and habits to the new reality. And here we consider the Catholic institution. A third group has replaced some ancient values for new ones. Some Catholic initiatives are in this area, although here we do not refer to them.

Regular attendance to the Church (off line) has experienced a decline while a religious spring could be found on the Net. There’s a kind of mediation crisis, a break between tradition and a new digital culture.

The Church could not avoid being on the Net. The digital place is not seen as a court or a place to impose anything, but rather a space for promoting its position on all matters that have an impact on human life.

With simply a click, religion becomes immediately accessible to individuals seeking meaning, information or content. With a religious click such institutions could achieve an intimate presence like never before. The challenge for these organizations is not to reach excellence according to Internet protocol, but to be able to create new ways relating the off line experience to the on line one. Social networking here could be the bridge that brings them closer together.

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