

HISTORIA RELIGIONUM AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

1 · 2009



PISA · ROMA
FABRIZIO SERRA EDITORE
MMIX

Per i riferimenti bibliografici si invitano gli autori ad attenersi scrupolosamente alle norme specificate nel volume di Fabrizio Serra, *Regole editoriali, tipografiche e redazionali*, Pisa-Roma, Serra, 2009², in particolare al capitolo *Norme redazionali*, consultabile e scaricabile Online alla pagina «Pubblicare con noi» del sito www.libraweb.net

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NARRATIVES OF NARRATIVES: CRITICAL APPROACHES TO CONTEMPORARY RELIGIONS AND MEDIA

MASSIMO RAVERRI

1. THE CENTRALITY OF THE MEDIA IN CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

CONTEMPORARY religious experience is a highly dynamic reality, in some respects uncertain, and contradictory: for it expresses a deep-seated tendency common to consumer societies and reflects the strategies and ideals of metropolitan generations, who are oblivious to their past and increasingly homogeneous in their mythologies, values and languages.

The religious scenery is informed by two opposite tendencies. The first tendency is that towards the simplification of the conceptual and semantic apparatus of the traditional religious institutions, which drastically reduces the possibilities of establishing symbolic links and interrelations. In a fundamentalist perspective, it attempts to re-construct the «genuine» religious tradition, an idealized harmonious and coherent luminous past, that could become the paradigmatic projection of a possible future. This tendency leads to monothetic methods of classification and to a greater rigidity in taxonomic patterns, based on a limited number of unequivocal principles: it promotes uniformity in religious outlook, and attempts to remove all otherness. The trend of establishing a strong and unified «identity», by emphasizing the immutability of the symbols of «tradition», actually betrays a sense of uneasiness in accepting the innovations and the contradictions involved in the cultural processes of contemporary society.

By contrast, a tendency can also be discerned to accept the complexity of the religious discourse, promoting the renewal of the world, in eschatological and often apocalyptic perspectives. What we are facing here is a spiritual experience that favours intuition and emotional involvement, one that cherishes the intrinsic form of things and encourages a grasping of their inner harmony: an experience born of non-Euclidean geometries, alternative logics, quantum physics and psychoanalysis, and which is crucially inspired by Eastern philosophies. Out of the perceived erosion of absolute truths developed the notion that in order to gain a genuine understanding of reality a more acute vision is required: a dynamic vision, freed from the fixity of dogmas and privileging intuition; a vision that does not fear what is relative, but rather accepts its logic. The new spiritual masters teach how to rediscover the mystical tension involved in the search for one's true self; they teach how to grasp in all its depth the harmony between man, nature and the divine. Based on generalisation rather than particularity, its religious practices tend towards greater openness and hybridisation. It favours a strategy of assimilation of

diversity, daring to include and absorb notions and images from different spiritual traditions, through the means of polythetic classifications. Otherness in this case is perceived as a positive source of inspiration.

While antithetical to one another, both tendencies ultimately derive from an attempt to craft new narratives that could be capable of responding to the sense of cultural disorientation caused by the processes of economic and social globalisation.

In spite of the many theoretical reflections (sometimes reiterated as stereotyped formulas) about modernity and secularization, contemporary religious spirituality proves to be playing a crucial role in the processes of creating meanings. It feeds on the languages and products of the new technologies in the fields of communication, entertainment and computer science. The logic of virtual reality is inherent in the spiritual sensibilities of the younger generations, who are both rooted in and represented by the mass media. Things could not be otherwise.

The economical centrality of the media gives them a powerful autonomy and permanence. Their cultural location is derived from their capacity to be both shapers of culture and products of that same culture. This 'double articulation' of the media makes their role and impact particularly difficult to pin down, and is one of the reasons that today we are still unsure of the nature and extent of their significance.¹

The question is this: in what sense and in which way have the media contributed to transform the religious experience as we are witnessing today? To what extent are these changes something really unprecedented? I would also argue that the relation between media and religion is affecting (and will increasingly affect) the way in which academic research on religion is conducted and disseminated.

The new character of the religious experience of those living in the world of electronic virtuality requires a change in methodology and in the tools for analysis. Terms usually taken for granted such as «faith» and «conversion», concepts such as «religious community», and values like the «authority of tradition», now appear to be obsolete or inappropriate; their use must necessarily be questioned.

In everyday conversation, the media are primarily referred to as expressions of technology: the media include communicative tools, utilities, publications and computer hardwares and softwares. Instead, we should start regarding the media as practices which engender meanings. The media are languages, ways of experiencing and understanding reality; they are also new and diverse: as such, they inevitably call into question some of the epistemological foundations of religious studies.

We should no longer reflect exclusively on the meaning, historically and in the present, of religion – of faith and belief and their supposed opposites such as knowledge and technology – but concentrate on the significance of the processes of mediation and mediatization without and outside of which no religion would ever be able to manifest or reveal itself in the first place. Mediatization and the technology it entails, form the condition of possibility for all revelation: mediatization belongs to the realm of the 'transcendental'.²

¹ S. HOOVER, *Religion in the Media Age*, London-New York, Routledge, 2006, p. 8.

² H. DE VRIES, in *Media Res: Global Religion, Public Spheres, and the Task of Contemporary Comparative Religious Studies*, in H. De Vries, S. Weber (eds.), *Religion and Media*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001, p. 28.

2. THE TRADITIONAL PARADIGM OF INTERPRETATION

The theoretical perspective has changed today and has come to be based on an assumption of circularity: that is, on the postulate that on the one hand new religious meanings are being conveyed by means of new symbols, rites, texts and communities; and that, on the other, new meanings arise because new linguistic modes have been established. By focusing on meaning, recent research has touched the very heart of the problem of the relation between religion and media. This focus helps understand how new religious meanings are produced and reproduced, and what may be the logic that informs the choice, the consumption and re-elaboration of virtual religious texts in relation to the various ways in which they are approached.³

In the past, it was easy to envisage the relation between religion and media in institutional terms. A dominant paradigm came to be established which, from the latter half of last century, influenced almost all the scientific production. This paradigm was based on an implicit dualism, which saw religions and the media as separate and self-contained cultural worlds: on the one hand stood the national apparatuses of media production and reception, with their market, interests and goals; on the other were equally closed and independent religious institutions. These two worlds were seen to act according to different if not opposite standpoints: it is a view that assumes a contrast between a rationalist, aggressive and triumphant modernity on one hand and a passive religion, which is «inevitably» destined to lose its social significance, on the other.

Even when these two worlds were seen as being in relation with one another, it was always assumed that one exploited the other: as if religions were using the media as mere technical vehicles for communication, or if the media were about to triumph on religions, moulding them after their own image. Implicit here was the idea that the media world and the religious world were in a state of ideological struggle, in which the «monopolising» forces of the media were increasingly prevailing over the «authentic» forms of spirituality, gradually but unremittently depriving traditional religious expressions of their value.⁴

The models proposed by Lazarsfeld, and later by Lasswell,⁵ identified what they regarded as the fundamental lines of research: the study of broadcasters and the analysis of their messages and means of communication. Critical attention, however, was mostly focused on the effects – be they intentional or unintentional – of the media on the public. What was emphasised was the power of the media in mass

³ See S. HOOVER, *Meaning, Faith and Spirituality in the Media World*, in J. Mitchell, S. Marinage (eds.), *Mediating Religion. Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark-Continuum, 2003. See also S. HOOVER, J. K. PARK, *Religion in the Digital Age: Field Research on Internet/Web Religion*, in E. Rothenbuhler, M. Coman (eds.), *Media Anthropology*, Thousand Oaks, Sage, 2005.

⁴ See F. BONI, *Teorie dei media*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2006, chapter 4.

⁵ P. LAZARFELD, B. BERTSON, H. GAUDER, *The People's Choice*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1948; H. LASSWELL, *The Structure and Function of Mass Communication in Society*, in L. Bryson (ed.), *The Communication of Ideas*, New York, Harper, 1948, pp. 37-51.

self-directed and essentially interactive communication. In these cases the acts of

fruition may simultaneously constitute acts of production.

Once the relations between medium, message and reception are taken into account, it can hardly be denied that commodity culture and the media are now mutually integrated in complex and profound ways: clearly, it is the modes of thought and communication that shape the religious discourse of late modernity. Scholars now convincingly argue that religions and media cannot be regarded as two separate and conflicting worlds: for they converge in the field of social practices, no doubt though polyhedric, even contradictory processes; yet, the relationship between them is always a dynamic one, based on the subtle negotiation of diverging discourses and inclinations. The individual user has indeed assumed an active role in elaborating the messages he chooses to receive and in constructing a religious discourse tailored to his needs.¹ «The shift in perspective is important. It became more and more common to think in terms of what audiences, individuals, and communities did with the media they used, than what the media did to those audiences, individuals and communities».² Traditional definitions stressed the media characteristic of being «one to many», that is: of representing a source of production and distribution of messages unilaterally directed to a wide and anonymous audience that serves as a passive recipient. Today, this view appears coarse and unsuited to reflecting the change that has taken place in communication strategies. Twentieth century societies witnessed the emergence of a new social reality – the mass means of communication was called into question. The «public» of late-modern societies is a far more articulate, fragmented and inhomogeneous than that of the past, so much so that one tends to speak of it in the plural, as «publics»: diversified groups, each privileging specific themes and modes of communication, and capable of activating meanings from the media they use – and meanings which are often independent of the actual contents of the media in question.³

The idea of all-pervasive media which «authentic» religious traditions are forced to guard themselves *against*, no longer holds: some kind of compromise, or adjustment, has been inevitable between the world of religious institutions, with their symbolic practices testifying to a link with tradition, and the symbolic practices dictated by the media. The media, after all, are irreversibly integrated in the fabric of contemporary society and cannot be ignored: they are here to stay.

4. THE RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS AND THE MEDIA

Particularly emblematic is the almost unlimited creation and spread of websites specifically devoted to religious knowledge and practices, no complete list of which would yet appear to have been drawn up. Some of these sites have been set up and

¹ See E. Bird, *The Audience in Everyday Life: Living in the Media World*, New York, Routledge, 2003; S. Hoover, L. Schofield Clark (eds.), *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media: Explorations in Media, Religion, and Culture*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2002.
² Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age*, p. 32.
³ See S. Moores, *Interpreting Audiences: The Ethnography of Media Consumption*, Thousand Oaks, Sage, 1998, in particular the first chapter.

society as technologies capable of creating forms of dependence and of conditioning the free choices of individuals, whether as citizens, voters or consumers.

The empiricist approach of the American school intertwined with the theoretical approach of the Frankfurt school. The latter offers a more pessimistic critical perspective, one that sees the media as marked by a strong ideological drive. In the hands of totalitarian regimes, the media represent dangerous instruments of psychological manipulation and control. The idea of an increasingly hierarchic and authoritarian social structure merging with a communications industry that is increasingly subtle and pervasive was taken up by certain «apocalyptic» researchers with regard to television. Television was described as having passivising effects, which foster a flat and uncritical adherence to imposed values and as making users regress to an infantile level of amusement, engendering a false feeling of fulfilment.

The above perspective seemed to have found clear confirmation in the rise of two sensational religious phenomena: in the 1970s, the resonating (albeit rather fleeting) success of televangelism in the USA;⁴ in the 1990s, the rise in Japan of new religious movements like Kōfuku no Kagaku and Agonshū, accomplished by means of aggressive advertising campaigns in all the media.⁵

Yet, there are two limits to this theory: the first is its tendency to regard the media as being somehow «alien» to «real» religious life – a force operating «from the outside» and according to its own logic. The second limit lies in the assumption that each individual is nothing but a white slate on which the most diverse beliefs can be inscribed – provided the message delivered is wisely and shrewdly combined with its medium.

3. THE NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES AND THE SHIFT IN PERSPECTIVE

What made the traditional interpretative paradigm most inadequate, however, was the recent invention of new communication technologies. One only needs to think of the vast increase in TV programmes via satellite and cable broadcast-ing, and of the dozens of theme channels targeting distinct and well defined social groups and breaking the oligopolistic sway of the great production and distribution companies. Let us also consider for instance the spread of personal computer phones and new software utilities (iTunes, YouTube, Facebook, the Chat lines). All these increasingly multifaceted technologies have facilitated modes of personal,

⁴ See J. Peck, *The Gods of Televangelism: The Crisis of Meaning and the Appeal of Religious Television*, Lexington, Greenwood Press, 1993; S. Bruce, *Pray TV: Televangelism in America*, London, Routledge, 1990; see also J. Hadden, A. Shupe, *Televangelism: Power and Politics on God's Frontier*, New York, Henry Holt, 1988.
⁵ See T. Astley, *The Transformation of a Recent Japanese New Religion: Okawa Ryūhō and Kōfuku no Kagaku*, «Japanese Journal of Religious Studies», xxii, 3-4, 1995, pp. 343-380; see also E. Baffelli, *Mass Media and Religion in Japan: Mediating the Leader's Image*, «Westminster Paper in Communication and Culture», iv, 1, 2007, pp. 83-99; J. Reader, *The Rise of a Japanese «New New Religion»*, «Themes in the Development of Agonshū», «Japanese Journal of Religious Studies», xv, 4, 1988, pp. 287-303; J.-P. Berthoin, KASHIO NAOKI, *Les nouvelles voix spirituelles au Japon: état des lieux et mutations des Religions*, 109, 2000, pp. 67-85; R. Gardner, *Aum and the Media: Lost in the Cosmos and the Need to Know*, in R. Kisala, M. Mullins (eds.), *Religion and Social Crisis in Japan*, New York, Palgrave, 2001, pp. 133-162.

are run by traditional religious institutions, churches and congregations; others by movements for religious renewal. We find «pan-religious» or «meta-religious» websites, which promote inter-religious dialogue, as well as sites devoted to alter-native spirituality. There are also many sites that are openly anti-religious: indeed, more so than any other means of communication, the Internet is offering a truly vast public arena for the voicing of religious dissent.¹

Heidi Campbell noted in her research that the majority of scholarship has been focused on Western traditions, most specifically Christianity.² Yet religion and computer-mediated communication are growing phenomena worldwide. Over against an initial suspicion regarding online environments that was not uncommon in the 1990s, especially on the part of more conservative religions, Christopher Helland observes that by the beginning of the new century most of the world religious tradition have embraced the media, to the point that not having Internet representation is a rarity for a religious organization, even if it is ludicrous in its beliefs and practices.³

Many scholars are questioning now one of the central tenets of the secularization thesis: namely, that modernity necessarily relegates religion to the private sphere of individually held beliefs and inner feelings. Roughly the same period that has seen emerging attention to the role, the specificity, and the impact of the new media, has also witnessed an unpredicted return of religion.

The «deprivation of modern religion» means that religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity had reserved for them. What was new in the 1980s was not only the emergence of the new religious movements, but also the revitalization and the assumption of public roles by precisely those religious traditions which theories of secularization had assumed were becoming ever more marginal and irrelevant in the modern world.⁴

The relation between religions and the media reveals a paradox that testifies to an increasingly complex negotiation between the private and public spheres. The «public» voice claimed today by religions is precisely that of media essentially operating in the private sphere, bringing together individuals who are sitting all alone at their computers.

There is a price to pay, however:

The integrated communication system based in digitized electronic production, distribution, and consumption, on the one hand weakens considerably the symbolic power of traditional senders external to the system, transmitting through historically encoded social habits: religion, morality, authority, traditional values. Not that they disappear, but they are weakened unless they recode themselves in the new system, where their power becomes multiplied by the electronic materiality of spiritually transmitted habits [...]. But by having to concede the earthly coexistence of transcendental messages, on demand pornography,

¹ See J. Cobb, *Cybergrace: The Search for God in the Digital World*, New York, Crown Books, 1998; see also L. Dawson, D. Cowan (eds.), *Religion on Line: Finding Faith on the Internet*, London, Routledge, 2004.
² H. CAMPBELL, *Religion and the Internet*, «Communication Research Trends», xxv, 1, 2006, pp. 1-24.
³ In C. Ess (ed.), *Cross-cultural Perspectives on Religion and Computer-Mediated Communication*, «Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication», xii, 3, 2007, p. 3.
⁴ J. CASANOVA, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 5.

soap operas, and chat-lines within the same system, superior spiritual powers still conquer souls but lose their suprahuman status. [...] Societies are finally and truly disenchanting because all wonders are on-line and can be combined into self-constructed image worlds.⁵

Because of the proliferation of religious channels and web sites, a more profound and far-reaching effect came in the way: the so-called «secular» media began to think very seriously about religion, discovering that religious themes «would sell well».

In the middle of the century, in the United States, for example, religion rarely appeared on TV, and only because of some official occasions. In fact religion was considered at the same time inherently controversial and of fading importance. Today the media market regularly offers programmes devoted to religious subjects. Religious programmes are broadcast during the week and specific TV channels have been created to meet the demand for spirituality. What is more, even media texts of a general character are increasingly featuring situations that are related to religion in a more or less direct way.

5. THE EGO AT THE CENTRE OF THE SOCIOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

The new languages through which the religious quest is expressed contribute to constructing a new sociological discourse that is entirely centred on the ego. The individual is free to embark on whatever virtual spiritual journey he finds most fascinating through TV channels or websites, choosing among a rizome-like range of spiritual «offers» derived from the most heterogeneous religious contexts.

At the bottom of this religiosity pervaded by media sensations and images lies an invitation to break free from ideological preconceptions and the burden of tradition: an invitation to gaze at oneself and the whole universe – at least for a moment – with «spiritual eyes», so as to «awaken» one's «more genuine» self and «expand the mind» in order to grasp the mystery of the profound identity between the divine in the universe and the divine in oneself. The individual here acts as his own guide: inner listening reveals what he really is and desires, in contrast to what he has been persuaded to believe. «It is not that there were no such individualistic religious movements before the 1970s – Shimazono Susumu observes – but since that time their development has been particularly prominent. The importance of the individualistic (egocentric) spiritual quest has steadily increased». ⁶ It is as if contemporary religiosity were marked by an «excess of individuality» – as Marc Augé writes⁷ – insofar as the individual envisages the self as a divine foundation – a cosmic Mind and Energy – and sees the world after his own image.⁸

Stephen Warner has aptly suggested that in order to grasp the nature of contemporary religiosity, it is necessary to move away from the notion of religion as an

¹ M. CASTELLS, *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, 1, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996, p. 62.
² SHIMAZONO SUSUMU, *From Salvation to Spirituality. Popular Religious Movements in Modern Japan*, Melbourne, Trans Pacific Press, 2004, p. 235.
³ M. AUGÉ, *Non luoghi*, Milano, Eleuthera, 1993.
⁴ See P. HEERLAS, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996.

As a consequence of this process, a sharp contradiction emerges: religious movements are busy formulating a critique and rejection of dominant economic ethics in order to adequately motivate their followers who wish to take radical steps towards salvation; yet, at the same time, these movements are also forced – if they are to survive at all – to conform to the logic of the market by producing symbolic goods easy to access and of wide circulation and by paying close attention to the role of the media, of which they make a widespread use, in order to better distribute their own products.¹

In an era dominated by the media and their playful deconstruction and reconstruction of traditional meanings, the solidity of the relationship between words, symbols, images, and things they represent, is undermined. The implications for religion are clear: many religious traditions are grounded in doctrines that specify *precisely* the relationship between symbols and meanings, between words and concepts. Today such claims are increasingly questioned: what is at stake is the legitimacy and spiritual authority of any religious institution.

Given that the «wisdom concealed within the self» is regarded as universal and timeless, it is possible to ignore the (often significant) differences between distinct religious traditions, which are dismissed as «the product of historical contingencies». Thus a fluid and heterogeneous spirituality was born, one that combines the religious ideas and practices of East and West to form an original hybrid. Neither East nor West, however, has any exclusive claim to this spirituality: for it belongs to both. Generations of young Americans, for instance, are finding a new paradigm and new ways of thinking in Japanese culture, as they discover Buddhism (especially Zen), martial arts and ancient therapeutic practices (from *shiatzu* to acupuncture). Yet Japan too, in the 1980s, discovered its own «East»: young Japanese felt drawn to American New Age and «dreamt of California». The exotic imagery of the East here meets that of the West, the two merging in an intricate «spiritual network». Ideas, myths and images dissolve into an alternative form of spirituality that possesses no past or cultural roots and is capable of uniting the young from Tokyo to New York and Berlin.²

The new communication system radically transforms space and time, the fundamental dimensions of human life. Localities become disembodied from their cultural, historical, geographic meaning, and re-integrated into functional networks, or into image collages, inducing a space of flows that substitutes the space of places. Time is erased in the new communication system when past, present, and future can be programmed to interact with each other in the same message. The space of flows and timeless time are the material foundations of a new culture that transcends and includes the diversity of historically transmitted systems of representation: the culture of the real virtuality where make-believe is belief in the making.³

¹ See E. Pace, *Etica e economia nel movimento religioso contemporaneo*, «Religione e società», XLVI, 2003, pp. 61-72, p. 72; see also B. H. Leblanc, *Nouvelles religions, nouveaux médias: les «sectes» et leur stratification of the dépeuve d'Internet*, «Religiologiques», 22, 2000, pp. 101-118; SHIMAZONO SUSUMU, *The Commercialization of the Sacred: the Structural Evolution of Religious Communities in Japan*, «Social Sciences Japan Journal», 1-2, 1998, pp. 181-198.

² D. Morley, K. Robbins, *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes, and Cultural Boundaries*, London, Routledge, 1995.

³ M. Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, 1, pp. 374-375.

«ascribed» practice and to see religion as an experience that is «constructed» by the self.¹ This, however, is a «saturated self»,² beset by an array of symbols and sophisticated subliminal languages: a self that is always potentially changeable.

Under contemporary conditions the self becomes fluid, improbable, adaptable, manipulatable, and above all else, something to be satisfied – the assumption being that the self's appetite is insatiable. [...] Religious identity becomes a phenomenon less ascribed, more subjective. The media are demonopolizing any single version of truth, and making a wide variety of religious options open to everyone.³

This process carries profound implications, as the focus on individual responsibility in the search for salvation limits the role played by tradition and deprives religious institutions of their authority.

6. RENEGOTIATING TRADITIONS

The kind of «personal autonomy in matters of faith»⁴ that makes individuals feel free to move beyond the perspectives and categories of the past cannot be regarded as merely a simple and spontaneous phenomenon. On the contrary, it is a sophisticated one: for novelty here always conceals the decisive presence of religious discourses acquired from a tradition of communal notions and practices. The problem is to understand how – despite the apparent spontaneity of individual spiritual quests – tradition is renegotiated by the use of new media languages.

Besides, it is questionable whether the word «spontaneity» should be used to describe a movement so closely linked to consumer society. Religious discourses have become increasingly commodified, and the boundaries between commodities, media images, programmes and icons, have all become blurred. The claim to enhance the divine within oneself betrays an arrogant impatience to attain salvation in the present, so much so that happiness, as an ideal, is identified with forms of immediate sense gratification – physical well-being, power, luxury, beauty and sex – as if the aim were to embody the myths of consumer success promoted in advertising. It would be unreasonable perhaps to suggest that following the demise of conventional ways of inducing religious experiences, corporations, within consumer society developed a new kind of religiosity, presenting religious experience – by means of advertising and the techniques of so-called «emotional marketing» – as a new luxury and form of entertainment. Yet it is clear that consumerist ideology has penetrated the very fabric of spiritual tendencies in affluent societies, reversing the traditional relation between the supply and demand of the holy.⁵

¹ S. Warner, *Work in Progress toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States*, «American Journal of Sociology», LXVIII, 5, 1993, pp. 1044-1093.

² K. Gergen, *The Saturated Self. Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*, New York, Basic Books, 1991.

³ W. Ruff, *A Generation of Seekers. The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*, San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1992, p. 195.

⁴ P. Hammond, *Religion and Personal Autonomy: The Third Disestablishment in America*, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 1992.

⁵ See M. Einstein, *Brands of Faith. Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age*, London, Routledge, 2007; see also B. Wilson (ed.), *Religion. Contemporary Issues*, London, Bellew, 1992.

It is as if this new form of creativity where seeking the most appropriate words and symbols to express itself by freely and innocently ransacking the most diverse religious traditions, dulling all cultural history, almost in an attempt to forge ahead with a codification of new ways of thinking.

7. A DIFFERENT CONSTRUCTION OF A RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

The growing importance of computer technology in everyday life, and its role in the maintenance of religious activity, might be thought to signal a further move towards remoteness and solitude in an area of life often thought of as intimate and alive with emotion and shared experience. The seeming solipsism of this is troubling for many observers, who express strong reservations about the phenomenon, worrying that such individualized practice would fail to deliver a wholesome religion worldview; that it would amount to a kind of narcissism. Yet, electronic communication, especially of the kind made possible by multi-media computers, is much more than a clever and interactive way of moving information around: it invites a complex sensory and emotional involvement, it has begun to take on the contours of a *genuine community* in its own right. A «virtual» community of physically isolated persons who repeatedly and protractedly interact in cyberspace represents a form of social aggregation of an entirely new kind, and one with its own codes and rituals.¹ Is it possible to speak of «virtual religious communities»? In what sense can we use this expression? The fundamental questions to be addressed are whether such communities are anything more than pseudo-communities – merely another expression of the utopian dream to recreate a golden age – and whether the whole idea of a virtual community based upon computer-mediated communication does not ultimately render problematic or even undermine our notions of community and public religious life. It is not simply that a virtual community has no location in physical space, but that it is made up of remote individuals from different cultural backgrounds, who enter an alternative, «parallel» reality when – momentarily brought together – they read or view the same things.²

The prevailing ethnographic evidence shows that online engagement generally does not threaten traditional communities and often supplements religious authority. But the processes of interaction are subtle and in a sense more corrosive: virtual communities never directly attempt to overturn religious hierarchy; in many cases, they are simply unconcerned by it. In turn, representatives of religious authority often either have difficulties in tracking down the many forms of online religious experience, or consciously avoid doing so. It may be that, in the future, religion

¹ See G. BECKERLEGGE, *Computer-mediated Religion: Religion on the Internet at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*, in *From Sacred Text to Internet*, London, Ashgate, 2002, pp. 219-264. See also S. Jones (ed.), *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, Thousand Oaks, Sage, 1997.

² In the case of religious communities dispersed around the world or of traditions that may be victims of political isolation if not persecution in their country, the use of Internet as an interactive medium allows believers to form «on line communities» that sustain their connection to distant cultic centres. But it also raises theological questions about the extent to which rituals and pastoral care can and should be channeled in this way. See BECKERLEGGE, *Computer-mediated Religion*, pp. 234-236.

the tradition.¹ Given that the transfer of religious activity onto the Internet is a relatively recent phenomenon, it is difficult to judge whether the most intimate dimension of religiosity can exclusively be sustained in a virtual environment. But, as O'Leary aptly remarks, Although the members of a virtual community may be linked by nothing more than their computer terminals, and therefore may be described as physically isolated, it is important to remember that it was the development of writing that turned communication from a public act into a private and highly introspective activity. Isolation and introspection could in themselves foster intense religious reflection.²

8. THE PROBLEM OF SUBJECTIVITY IN SOCIAL SCIENCES: THE TEMPORARY APPROACH

The contemporary critical approach in social sciences stresses the fact that what is specific to the communication system, organized around the electronic integration of all communication modes, is not its inducement of virtual reality but the construction of «real virtuality»; it also raises questions regarding the arbitrary and subjective character of every scientific discourse.

The issue of just where the dividing line may be traced between objective facts and subjective elaboration represents a dilemma that has fostered reflections on historiography ever since the XIX century. What is at stake here is the validity of historical and anthropological knowledge, and its scientific character. Hence, since the 1970s, the affirmation of the reflexive nature of every analysis has been one of the founding (and most controversial) themes of hermeneutics.³ What has been regarded as a paradigm component is not merely the arbitrariness of signs in acts of signification, but also the arbitrariness of the syntagmatic and syntactic positioning of signs. The classic distinction maintained in structural linguistics between observer and observed is here radically called into question.⁴ That evidence – «facts» –

¹ D. CARTER, «Digital Democracy» or «Information Aristocracy»? *Economic Regeneration and Information Economy*, in B. Loader (ed.), *The Governance of Cyberspace: Politics, Technology, and Global Restructuring*, London, Routledge, 1997, pp. 136-154.

² S. O'LEARY, *Cyberspace and Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks*, «Journal of the American Academy of Religion», LXIV, 4, 1996, pp. 781-808, p. 784.

³ Probably the first publication dealing with this problem has been the article of J. OKEIX, *The Self and Scientism*, published in the «Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford» and then republished in *Own and Other Culture*, London, Routledge, 1996, pp. 27-44.

⁴ See A. BARBARO, *Storia del pensiero antropologico*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2002, pp. 219-230.

cannot clearly be distinguished from its representation is a problem which scholars of religion are facing today.¹ In the cosmopolitan cultures of late modernity

reality itself is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting, in the world of make believe, in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience. All messages of all kinds become enclosed in the medium, because the medium has become so comprehensive, so diversified, so malleable, that it absorbs in the same multimedia text the whole of human experience, past, present, and future.²

Hayden White has described historical and social «facts» as the end products of a formulation process that turns non-structured «events» into a «narrative». The narrative genre adopted serves as a protocol to interpret, select and elaborate data. It is the system of integrated media languages that establishes these «facts». «Data» increasingly coincide with media «narratives»: «facts» are virtual texts, palimpsests and bricolage, so that the structures of the evidence, those of the imagination, and those of interpretation, go hand in hand. No doubt, it is difficult to shed light on the different subjective perspectives that characterize all these «narratives». Not merely because certain religious experiences are increasingly taking place in the virtual world of the media, but also because religious traditions are undergoing processes of mythicisation that are difficult to grasp, powerful and deceptive, which alluringly re-elaborate facts of the past, transforming them into «invented traditions».³

These «invented traditions» should be regarded not as the sum of the actual ritual practices of the past that continue to exist in the present, but rather as prescriptive representations of desirable institutions and ideas that have been *constructed* on the basis of ancient forms of religious experience, which are removed from their historical context and re-elaborated. «Customs» – those flexible, changeable and polyvalent practices capable of adapting the past to the present – intertwine with the idealized «memory» of harmonious religious experiences thought to have survived unchanged, *despite* the passage of time. The core of these «mythologies» is strongly normative: for «traditions» would be seen to embody not so much what has measured itself against modernity, as the source of what religious institutions need in the present, in order to construct a meaningful identity discourse and to preserve cohesion and consensus among their followers in the face of the disorientation induced by globalisation and multiculturalism.

History and anthropology thus become the «narrative» means of translating other forms of narrative. Perhaps – and this may seem paradoxical – in the study of a religious phenomenon, it is only by critically highlighting the interaction between the various subjective perspectives, along with their semiotic apparatuses and the ways in which they are consumed and re-elaborated, that the true «objectivity» of the phenomenon may be grasped.

¹ See J. CLIFFORD, *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1988, in particular the chapter *On Ethnographic Authority*, pp. 21-54.
² M. CASTELLS, *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, I, pp. 372-373.
³ E. Hobsbawm, T. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1983.
 See also A. GIDDENS, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1991.

«Far from existing prior to and independent of any inquiry – Mark Taylor writes – the very phenomenon of religion is constituted by local discursive practices. The investigators create – sometimes unknowingly – the objects and truths they profess to discover». This perspective constitutes a dangerous challenge for history as a discipline. The problematic practice of subjective historical interpretation here merges with fantasy. But if there is no distinction between the two, then there is no need to invoke a concept such as that of «history» in order to describe a past that influences the present. No doubt, the representation of data from the past cannot be regarded as something separate from «fictional» forms of interpretation and imagination. It is true that facts only give rise to an historical discourse when they have been assigned meaning; yet, there is a note of excess in the diametrically opposite theory: that social scientists write *fictions* about *fictions*, while presenting them as historical facts. It is only appropriate that the issue of the relation between reality and fiction and the very meaning of the terms used in religious studies is now being addressed. The distinction between what is concrete and «objective» and what is «subjective» and virtual has become subtle, at times almost imperceptible, in contemporary religiosity. The new communication technologies have led to the formation of peculiar textual forms – hypertexts – that broaden expressive horizons and modify epistemological foundations.

9. THE INNOVATIVE NATURE OF THE VIRTUAL TEXTS

Structured like networks with nodes that are mutually connected through a series of links, the hypertexts can contain vast quantities of information in a very limited space, and can be consulted by «switching» from one content to another in very little time, allowing the individual to choose from different possible routes. The contents themselves are extremely diverse, ranging from written or audio texts to sounds and fixed or moving images. Deconstructionist scholars such as George Landow reject the notion that hypertexts are linear text, and emphasise the lack of any hierarchical structure in their diverse contents.⁴ Although there is no need to establish a univocal order of succession in the various units that comprise hypertextual material, this does not mean that electronic texts lack any structure: for it is still possible to find in these texts an overall meaning derived from the relation between their individual elements. Each hypertext should thus be regarded as «a structure of possible structures». Electronic texts do away with the conventional need for mono-directional reading: data is instead organised on the basis of the assumption that it is freely approachable and open to a variety of readings. Faced with a number of alternative options, the reader finds it hard to explore

¹ M. Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 7.
² G. LANDOW, *Hypertext. The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.
³ D. BOUTER, *Lo spazio dello scrivere*, Milano, Vita e pensiero, 1993, p. 183; the first edition is *Writing Space. The Computer, Hypertext and the History of Writing*, Hillsdale, Lawrence Erlbaum, 1991.

the whole length of the hypertext, and focuses instead on the routes and sections that most attract his interest. It is certainly possible to lose one's way when faced with the mass of information a multi-linear textual structure has the means to convey, or to privilege an exclusively recreational mode of textual exploration. Yet, even in this new feature, a positive value may be found, because «in the hypertext, the omission of a specific meaning is the inevitable – yet advantageous – counter-part to the wealth of possible meanings that characterises any plural text».¹

With the spread of hypertextuality, a shift is taking place in the way texts are conceived and made use of: a shift from a view of the text as something enclosed and «protected» to one that conceives of texts as open and «disjointed» writings. None of these conceptions commands any absolute authority. Both are plausible and justifiable; both are historically attested. In different epochs and across various cultures, texts have been regarded as spaces in which it was not only possible, but even legitimate, to intrude. Hermeneutics, along with philology, has contributed to strengthen the idea that the written text represents an inviolable body which the reader can only interpret: the reader has the possibility to give voice to the text, to dig deeply into it and extract its most hidden meanings, but not the right to alter it. Computer texts, by contrast, are open and rhizome-like in their structure, and potentially ever changeable; they may be copied and interpolated to no end and by many hands, and later republished on the net where they may be read anew and re-elaborated.

The prospect of having open and reversible sacred texts is particularly appealing for new religious movements. The process of «disclosing» ever-new spiritual visions allows the religious movement to change its message according to different circumstances, in order to meet the needs of different groups of followers. A similar process may be seen at work within consumer society, where advertising is constantly required to furnish new products, designs and dreams.

The above perspective also sheds light on the appeal exercised by esoteric episteme on contemporary religiosity.² Based on the notion of multifaceted truth, esotericism provides the theoretical means to assimilate new perspectives and control their potential by integrating them within a harmonic system. The notion that ultimate truth is expressed in the reality of the world, yet in a concealed way, which becomes increasingly known to those initiated, allows every esoteric religious text, rite and image to be reinterpreted by means of different interpretative keys: secret lines, which disclose ever «further» meanings. As Giovanni Filoramo rightly underlines, the rebirth of a «gnostic style» or religious perspective might even be regarded as one of the most significant elements in the construction of contemporary religious discourse.³ Little wonder that the fluid creativity of the new spirituality actually developed in conjunction with the «light» technologies of virtual imagery and the erratic paths of the hypertexts in the Internet. This turn towards a gnostic

¹ G. BETTETINI, B. GASPARINI, N. VITTADINI, *Gli spazi dell'ipertesto*, Milano, Bompiani, 1999, p. 104.
² See A. FAIVRE, J. NEEDLEMAN (eds.), *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, New York, Crossroad Press, 1994; see also E. J. BRILL, 1996.
³ See G. FILORAMO, *Millenarismo e New Age*, Bari, Edizioni Dedalo, 1999, in particular the chapters 4 and 5.

way is not exclusive to monothestic traditions: in Asia too, Buddhist esotericism – the *mikkyō* episteme – has gained significance and is influencing the ideas and practices of almost all New Religions.

The problem is that hypertextuality is increasingly being used in the writing of scientific material. The implications of this practice are not easily accepted: for hypertexts challenge basic assumptions such as the primacy of the author and the originality and completeness of his work. Though books we have grown used to the idea that the author alone is responsible for the text he has created. The text must be presented to the reader in its final draft, and the fact that its sole source is the ideational effort of its author is taken for granted – so much so that the author is required to state precisely what sections of his writing are not original – and anonymous works are regarded with distrust.

Today, the very moment a computer «saves» a hypertext, thus conveying the impression it is giving it a definite form, what it is actually doing is paradoxically allowing the text to remain forever open and modifiable. Scientific discourse too is increasingly making use of «virtual» texts that «roll» all over the place: text that can be accessed, manipulated, updated and enriched with many other people's views. This is for instance the case with online references, interactive texts or the rise and development of Wikipedia. No doubt, telematic audio-visual media are far more «user-friendly» than books. These media are multi-sensory, as they are perceived by more than one sense at the same time, causing strong emotional involvement. They allow the user to access an elementary iconic level that bestows immediate clarity and realism on knowledge, strongly exploiting the intuitive capacity of the mind. Audio-visual telematic media have an open cognitive dimension, one that is not fully controlled by the author: for the interplay of images and sounds – in a fluid, often subliminal way – always offers new perspectives.

10. THE VISUAL LITERACY

In the last decades of the 20th century, a gradual but radical transition took place from a form of knowledge chiefly acquired through books and writing to one that is also – some would say predominantly – acquired through the «visual literacy» of the computer. This transition from one sensorial mode to the other has re-oriented the way in which reality is apprehended and becomes meaningful: from the linear, consequential form of intelligence that marks writing, a shift has been made to a different form of intelligence which may be described as simultaneous, correlative and complex. In passing to what has been defined as «the third phase, beyond orality, literacy and print», knowledge has not been degraded, but has merely changed its nature: it is now far more sophisticated – and still we do not know all its semantic possibilities.⁴ Scholars invoke the invention of the press as a parallel, and point to the reasons why this caused such strong socio-cultural

¹ See W. ONG, *Orality and Literacy*, New York, Routledge, 2002 (first ed. 1982); P. MESSARIS, *Visual Literacy, Culture*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994; M. STRUKKEN, L. CARTWRIGHT, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001; R. SIMONE, *La Terza Fase. Forme del sapere che stiamo perdendo*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2001.

changes: they emphasise the unease, doubts and fears this new «technology of knowledge» engendered.¹

The study of contemporary religions is inevitably destined to embrace the new forms of communication and electronic expression. Even leaving aside other factors, this may be discerned from the fact that electronic language – the language of contemporary religiosity – could not easily be translated into other linguistic codes: the written text can only convey a dull, flat and limited version of a mediatic text. But the adoption of hypertexts will change the traditional premises through which scientific discourse acquires legitimacy: one need only consider how is destined to be reconfigured the relation between rational, discursive knowledge and intuitive, emotional knowledge.

Studies of the history of religions are now at a difficult crossroads: there is a risk that the world of religious studies may remain the same and have no part in these linguistic changes, thus becoming a *refuge* for those who wish to *guard* themselves against the new modes of processing knowledge.

Should this happen, contemporary religious history would inevitably be left out of the field of historical inquiry, as its means of analysis and writing would prove methodologically deficient and cognitively backwards.

On the other hand, there is also a risk that studies of contemporary religiosity may forget their roots, radically reject the use of traditional concepts and modes of expression – perceived as inadequate – and adopt the critical tools of other disciplines (such as communication studies) in the attempt to develop a scientific discourse of their own. In this case, anything classical would generally be excluded from their field of inquiry.

There is a real chance that a rift may occur in the field of the history of religions: it will not be easy to reconcile the two souls of the discipline, or to emphasise the creativity that might spring from their interaction. Yet, this – I believe – is the task that awaits us.

¹ See E. EISENSTEIN, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983.