

MEDIA AND RELIGION: POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS

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Słowa kluczowe: media cyfrowe, religia, World of Warcraft, ciało, zbawienie

Media, especially digital ones, greatly influence all areas of the contemporary society, including religion. T. Halík even says that “media is the religion of the modern western world... It is media that represents the world and puts individual pieces of the image of our world together... Media are, similar to religion, arbitrators of the truth and importance... Media offer a common language, shared stories, “great talking“ and symbols – they shape people’s thinking and life. This all is a fragment of the age-old fundamental features of the social role of religion“¹ T. Halík, on the one hand, also states that media are taking over the role of religion, on the other hand he is rather concerned about these changes and asking social science, including linguistics and theology, to study these processes more².

However, there are more authors now, for example Robert M. Geraci and J. Vallikatt, who go to extreme and speculate that the new forms of media, especially videogames, are capable of replacing also traditional religion. When talking about videogames, they mean especially the game called *World of Warcraft*. Geraci for example says that “*World of Warcraft* can offer alternatives to traditional religious practice... *World of Warcraft* offers its players many traditionally religious opportunities, including a community, a moral compass, a sense of identity and meaningful purpose, and transcendent experience. With millions of users receiving these sacraments from *World of Warcraft* rather than a traditional religious institution, there can be no doubt about seriousness of the game’s religious implications“³. Similarly,

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¹ T. Halík, *Média – náboženstvi naši doby?* Dingir 4 (2009), p. 118–119.

² Ibidem, p. 119.

³ R. M. Geraci, *Virtually Sacred. Myth and Meaning in World of Warcraft and Second Life*. Oxford: University Press, 2014, p. 32.

J. Vallikatt states that “*World of Warcraft* might fulfil the religious functions of creating world views, finding meaning and exploring identity through analysis of the game’s mythic content, ritual practices and online communities”⁴.

Can then media, especially videogames, replace traditional religion? What are the possibilities and limitations of the new forms of religion in the cyberspace of digital media, specifically in the videogame *World of Warcraft*? The answers to these questions are what we set as the goal of this contribution.

INFLUENCE OF TRADITION MEDIA ON RELIGION

J. Lohisse⁵ and S. Harnad⁶ distinguish four revolutionary forms of media – the spoken word, written word, printed word and the Internet, as these have greatly influenced European culture and society, including religion (in Europe it was, in particular, Christian religion, but also Judaism and Islam.) We could speak of the first forms of media as of traditional ones and the Internet as the modern one. The traditional media (the spoken word, written word or printed word) had a great influence over religions for whole centuries, even millennia. When we identify this influence, we will be able to understand better also the present influence of digital media on religion.

The spoken word is the first and privileged medium. It is on the one hand a medium because it serves us to express ideas and communicate, but on the other it is bound strongly to human, vocal chords, breathing and so on. Thus, the spoken word has a special position between media. It also probably had the greatest impact on the rise of religion, because it brings those whose communicate in unity and transcendence, which is an important factor for religion. In the deeper history, words were supposed to have magical power, as we can shape reality through them. The importance of spoken word is emphasised in Christian religion. Jesus Christ preached the gospel orally and only wrote in the sand once (John 8: 1–11). The prologue to the gospel of John mentions that in the beginning there was the Word of God (John 1: 1). The early Christianity was pneumatic and spread with the help of the Holy Spirit bringing the gifts of teaching, prophecy and languages (Acts 2: 1–13). Christian religion was being spread through oral tradition, which has – along with Holy Writ – was the most important source of teaching of Catholic Church.

The written-word media started to gradually disrupt the uniformity and profoundness of speech. The written word, especially the phonetic one, differs from the spoken word – it is visual, externalised and features sequencing of linearly spread symbols. This requires discipline in attention and thinking, since one needs to dis-

⁴ J. Vallikatt, *Virtually Religious: Myth, Ritual and Community in World of Warcraft*. Melbourne: RMIT University, 2014. [online]. [2020–03–22], p. 193. Available at: <https://researchbank.rmit.edu.au/eserv/rmit:160839/Vallikatt.pdf>.

⁵ J. Lohisse, *Komunikační systémy. Socioantropologický pohled*. Praha: Karolinum, 2003, p. 12.

⁶ S. Harnad, *Post-Gutenberg Galaxy: The Fourth Revolution in the Means of Production of Knowledge*. The Public-Access Computer Systems Review [online]. 2 (1991), no. 1, [2020–03–22], p. 39. Available at: <http://cogprints.org/1580/1/harnad91.postgutenberg.html>.

tinguish symbols and organise them logically and semantically. J. Lohisse argues that the written word introduced scientific thinking (scientific rationality)⁷ also in religion.

Christianity started and was spread through oral tradition (human words and the Word of God) and the Bible (written word). For example, Paul the Apostle (2 Sol. 2: 15) wrote: “Therefore, brothers, stand fast, and hold the traditions which you have been taught, whether by word, or our letter“. However, the Medieval Period, but also the period after, saw some tension between religion and science (or theology and philosophy), with these two forms of media competing. The spoken word, or oral tradition, favoured religion, while the written word inclined to science and rationality. This tension has been here since that time and also Pope John Paul II tried to deal with it in his encyclical „Fides et ratio“ (1998). In the background of this dispute are traditional forms of media (the spoken and the written word), while they both have shaped not only Christian, religion, but also other Western theistic religions such as Judaism and Islam.

INFLUENCE OF DIGITAL MEDIA ON RELIGION

With the end of the 20th century came new digital media, media that are considerably different from traditional ones and that have a great influence also on religion. V. Flusser, seeing the raise of new media, argued that instead of linear code we can identify a new code that is based on images⁸. We can agree with this, because in the context of the new pictorial turn, we can see that images do indeed dominate in contemporary media communication⁹. However, this approach needs to be updated and extended because we have a new cultural standard now. It is called the Internet. The Internet is characterised by network-based, high-speed, multiplatform and multimedia communication. J. Lohisse, but also S. Harnad, T.H. Eriksen and others understand the Internet and its www feature to be the beginning of a new cultural and medium era that Lohisse calls the Non-Shape era. The Internet, similarly to the preceding forms of media, influences religion too. Walter Ong comments on this influence: “religion began in an era of orality, was transmitted into visual form through manuscript writing as well as print, and has now entered the world in a new way via electronic media“¹⁰.

The influence of digital media on religion can be twofold: passive or active. The first one represents religion online, while the second one means online reli-

⁷ J. Lohisse, *Komunikační systémy. Socioantropologický pohled*. Praha: Karolinum, 2003, p. 51.

⁸ A. Ströhl, *Vilém Flusser (1920–1991): Fenomenologie komunikace*. Praha: Argo, 2016, p. 101.

⁹ A. Martinengo, *From the Linguistic Turn to the Pictorial Turn — Hermeneutics Facing the ‘Third Copernican Revolution’*. Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics 5 (2013), p. 309.

¹⁰ G.P. Grieve & H.A. Campbell, *Studying Religion in Digital Gaming. A Critical Review of an Emerging Field*. In Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll (eds.): *Religion in Digital Games. Multiperspective & Interdisciplinary Approaches*. Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet, 5 (2014), p. 53.

gion¹¹. The „religion online” brings religion into the cyberspace of digital media, but introduces no changes. We can see it as information that is published on the web, information about religious services, various religious activities, discussions, religious advices and so on. Thus the cyberspace of digital media offers positive possibilities for evangelization and spreading of religious information. John Paul II, in his message to the 36th World Communications Day (24 January, 2002), called „A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel” saw a great opportunity for spreading gospel through the Internet: “The Church approaches this new medium with realism and confidence. Like other communications media, it is a means, not an end in itself. The Internet can offer magnificent opportunities for evangelization if used with competence and a clear awareness of its strengths and weaknesses... It is important, therefore, that the Christian community think of very practical ways of helping those who first make contact through the Internet to move from the virtual world of cyberspace to the real world of Christian community”¹².

The second form of relation between religion and cyberspace is online religion, characterized by interactivity, for example mutual and active participation in prayers, rituals, meditation and so on. These interactive forms are much more attractive in comparison to passive participation in online religion. However, they still cannot replace physical presence at events. for example Holy Mass in Catholic church. Pope Benedikt XVI speaks on this: “...when we speak about the value of presence at a mass that is broadcast by the massmedia, then someone who does it must know that doing this is normally not taken as fulfilment of the mandatory involvement on a feast day. Though the visual representation may show the event, it does not bring it”¹³. Catholic Church informs us that both religion online and online religion offer only representation of the event, and not the event itself.

However, the online religion also comprised of non-traditional forms of religion, such as various nontheistic religious groups, sects and even videogames – which feature religious elements only implicitly. One of such videogames is *World of Warcraft (WoW)*. *WoW* is a massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) released in 2004 by Blizzard Entertainment. *WoW* was the world’s most popular MMORPG by player count of nearly 10 million in 2009. The game had a total of over a hundred million registered accounts by 2014. J. Vallikatt states: “*WoW* is a space that offers immense opportunity for players to transcend the ordinary in their lives through the myths, ritual and community it offers... It is through *WoW*, in

¹¹ Ch. Helland claims: “At that time there was a clear distinction between religious websites where people could act with unrestricted freedom and a high level of interactivity (online religion) verses the majority of religious websites, which seemed to provide only religious information and not interaction (religion online).” In: Ch. Helland, *Online Religion as Lived Religion. Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet*. Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet, 1 (2005), 1.

¹² See more: Message of the Holy Father John Paul II for the 36th World Communications Day «Internet: A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel” [online]. [2020–03–22]. Available at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paulii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_jpii_mes_20020122_world-communications-day.html

¹³ Benedikt XVI., *Posynodálna apoštolská exhortácia Sacramentum caritatis pápeža Benedikta XVI. o Eucharistii – prameni a vrchole života a poslania Cirkvi*. Trnava: SSV, 2007, p. 72.

many cases, that players discover part of their authentic selves, through the exploration of their identity and the meaning of life. We can argue that this exploration of their identity is related to what has previously been described as a religious life¹⁴. Vallikatt claims that in the modern secular world, religion can be reawakened by the means of technologies, as we see for example in the *WoW* videogame. This new form of religion can satisfy spiritual needs of its players by exceeding everyday way of life and finding new forms of the sacred in myths, rituals and communities in *WoW*¹⁵.

Robert M. Geraci, similarly to Vallikatt, thinks that religious dimension such as teaching, myth, ritual, experience and institutions, can also be applied to *WoW*. Geraci believes that new technologies and new videogames can saturate religious needs of a present postmodern and secularised man. *WoW* can, he says, “offer many traditional religious features such as community, moral standards, orientation towards transcendent meaning and experience”¹⁶. Geraci even claims that, taking in account the number of users: “*World of Warcraft* can compete with traditional religions for adherents... With millions of users receiving the sacraments from *WoW* rather than a traditional religious institution”¹⁷. Geraci also disagrees with opponents who argue that *WoW* is only virtual reality, therefore something unrealistic and false. He believes that the virtual reality in *WoW* is genuine because it offers a secular person a virtual sacred and spiritual practice. Geraci even argues that the digital games are not “less real than an angelic resurrection or a parted sea that can be neither seen nor felt in there and now”¹⁸.

We can therefore summarise that both Vallikatt and Geraci agree that *WoW*, but also other videogames, can replace traditional religions and offer a religion of the future for a hypermodern man. Yet, do we understand the nature of traditional religion and difference between it and online religion correctly?

LIMITATIONS OF ONLINE RELIGION

We think that Geraci and Vallikatt start with two incorrect assumptions: firstly it is inadequate understanding of the nature and intention of religion and secondly it is underestimation of importance of human body in religion. A definition of religion is not complete when we mention just some of its features, such as myths, rituals and communities and their relation to the phenomenon of sacred, as it is necessary to understand the primary function of religion. H. Bergson believes this primary function to be in its approach to death: „religion is a natural defence response to deal

¹⁴ J. Vallikatt, *Virtually Religious: Myth, Ritual and Community in World of Warcraft*. Melbourne: RMIT University, 2014.[online]. [2020-03-22], p. 193. Available at: <https://researchbank.rmit.edu.au/eserv/rmit:160839/Vallikatt.pdf>.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 199.

¹⁶ R. M. Geraci, *Virtually Sacred. Myth and Meaning in World of Warcraft and Second Life*. Oxford: University Press, 2014, p. 32.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 32.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 99.

with the idea of inevitability of death”¹⁹. The world’s greatest religions, for example Christian religion, but also other religions, focus on death.

In the first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 15: 20–22) St Paul speaks of resurrection as the fundamental pillar of Christian religion: “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive“. According to Apostle Paul, Christian religion aims at resurrection with Christ, which also means salvation. However, he (Col. 3: 1–4) also sees salvation as a transformational process that happens during one’s life, as he says: “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory“. To rise from the death, either in spiritual or physical form, stands for a significant event that incorporates also human body.

Human body is an important component for salvation in Christian religion. In order to achieve salvation in Christian religion, baptising is required as it transforms the whole person, including body. In his letter to the Romans, apostle Paul (Rom. 6: 3–7) says: “Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – because anyone who has died has been set free from sin“. The sinful body is therefore cleansed and spiritualised during baptising, which means body is a crucial component for salvation.

Therefore, salvation of the human, including the body, cannot be done virtually through cyberspace of digital media. This means that the difference between online religion and traditional religion is tremendous – it is the physical human body.

CONCLUSION

Media and religion are bound together very tightly because religious ideas are spread with the help of media. However, it is not only religious content that is influenced by media, but also its formal and technical aspect, because each and every medium has influenced religion in its own way. Out of the four revolutionary forms of media, (the spoken word, written word, printed word and the Internet) religion was primarily shaped by the spoken word (human word and the word of God) and the written word (the Bible). The spoken word is privileged among other media, because it is a natural feature of human body. The written word is a visual and external medium that is quite different from the spoken word; it, in addition, started the shift towards science. This caused a tension between religion, based on the spoken

¹⁹ H. Bergson, *Filozofické eseje*. Bratislava: „Slovenský spisovateľ“, 1970, p. 283.

word, and science, based on the written word. The printed word, the third revolutionary medium, helped to develop what the written word started, i.e. rationality and science. The fourth revolutionary medium, the Internet, or speaking more broadly – digital media, bring even greater influence than the previous forms of media, taking religion from the traditional physical dimension and placing it into cyberspace. Religion in the cyberspace of digital media can take a passive form (religion online), or active form (online religion). Some authors think that online religion can also incorporate various pseudo-religious forms, including videogames. They even believe that these new religion forms may even replace traditional religions. In this paper, we showed that no forms of online religion, including videogames such as *World of Warcraft*, have a potential to supersede traditional religion. Online religion cannot possibly offer resurrection or win over dichotomy between virtual and real human body. Human body and soul, the object of salvation in Christianity, cannot be ignored, or "dissolved" in the cyberspace. This is the reason why human body remains a conservative and irreplaceable element in every traditional religion.

MEDIA AND RELIGION: POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS

SUMMARY

Media, especially the four revolutionary ones (the spoken word, written word, printed word and the Internet) have had an important influence on shaping of religion. The spoken word is a natural creator of religion and in Christian religion it manifested as oral tradition. The written word (in Christianity the Bible) is an external and visual media that brings discipline in thinking and starts the shift towards science. The differences between the spoken word and written word resulted in tension between religion and science (theology and philosophy). The printed word took the tendency introduced by the written word even further, but the Internet – or digital media in general – is a totally different form of media (multimedia, network based and so on) that takes religion into the cyberspace. Religion in the cyberspace can be passive (religion online) or active (online religion). These constitute yet another possibility for traditional religions to spread. Nevertheless, online religion also offers non-traditional forms of religion, including videogame such as *World of Warcraft (WoW)*, these forms also include religious elements. Some authors claim that these new forms of religion, for example *WoW*, can replace also traditional religions. In this paper we argue that the limitation of online religion is in human body, as human body and soul are subjects for salvation (resurrection). Salvation, which also includes human body, is almost impossible to realise in online religion.

MEDIA I RELIGIA: MOŻLIWOŚCI I OGRANICZENIA

STRESZCZENIE

Cztery rewolucje medialne, reprezentowane przez słowo mówione, tekst pisany, druk oraz internet nie mogły pozostać bez istotnego wpływu na życie religijne. Słowo mówione ukształtowało świat wierzeń, co w chrześcijaństwie wyraża się jako tradycja ustna. Spisanie słów – chrześcijańska Biblia – stało się zewnętrznym i widzialnym nośnikiem Objawienia, wnoszącym w ów światy przekaz dyscyplinę intelektualną i zwrot w kierunku naukowej precyzji. Różnice pomiędzy słowem mówionym i pisany skutkowały napięciami pomiędzy religią i nauką, między teologią i filozofią. Druk słowa jeszcze bardziej nasilił wspomniane zjawiska. Natomiast internet, multimedia, sieci społecznościowe, czy też media cyfrowe w ogólności, przenoszą świat wierzeń w świat wirtualny. Religia w świecie cyfrowym może występować w formie pasywnej – jako religia w cyberprzestrzeni, albo w formie aktywnej – jako religia cyberprzestrzeni. Takie ujęcie otwiera kolejny horyzont upowszechniania religii tradycyjnych. Niemniej religia cyberprzestrzeni odnosi się również do nowych form religijności, jak np. zawarte w grach wideo (*World of Warcraft*) elementy kultyczne. Niektórzy z autorów kuszą się nawet o stwierdzenie, iż owa „nowa religia” będzie w stanie zastąpić religie tradycyjne. W niniejszym artykule dokonuje się polemiki z tego typu twierdzeniami. Granicą religii cyberprzestrzeni jest ludzka cielesność. Wszakże to właśnie ludzkie ciało i dusza są rzeczywistościami podlegającymi zbawieniu i zmartwychwstaniu. Objęcie zbawieniem ciała człowieka jest w świecie wirtualnym praktycznie niemożliwe.

MEDIEN UND RELIGION: MÖGLICHKEITEN UND GRENZEN

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Medien, insbesondere die vier revolutionären (das gesprochene Wort, das geschriebene Wort, das gedruckte Wort und das Internet), haben die Gestaltung der Religion maßgeblich beeinflusst. Das gesprochene Wort ist ein natürlicher Schöpfer der Religion und manifestiert sich in der christlichen Religion als mündliche Überlieferung. Das geschriebene Wort (im Christentum die Bibel) ist ein externes und visuelles Medium, das Disziplin im Denken bringt und den Wandel in Richtung Wissenschaft in Gang setzt. Die Unterschiede zwischen gesprochenem und geschriebenem Wort führten zu Spannungen zwischen Religion und Wissenschaft (Theologie und Philosophie). Das gedruckte Wort nahm die durch das geschriebene Wort eingeführte Tendenz noch weiter auf, aber das Internet – oder die digitalen Medien im Allgemeinen – ist eine völlig andere Form von Medien (Multimedia, netzwerk-basiert usw.), die Religion in den Cyberspace bringt. Religion im Cyberspace kann passiv (Religion online) oder aktiv (Online-Religion) sein. Dies ist eine weitere Möglichkeit für die Verbreitung traditioneller Religionen. Online-Religion bietet jedoch auch nicht-traditionelle Religionsformen an, einschließlich Videospiele wie *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*). Diese Formen enthalten auch religiöse Elemente. Einige Autoren behaupten, dass diese neuen Religionsformen, zum Beispiel *WoW*, auch traditionelle Religionen ersetzen können. In diesem Artikel argumentieren wir, dass die Einschränkung der Online-Religion im menschlichen Körper liegt, da menschlicher Körper und Seele Gegenstand der Erlösung (Auferstehung) sind. Die Erlösung, zu der auch der menschliche Körper gehört, kann in der Online-Religion nicht erreicht werden.

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