The Sacred in Bits and Pixels: An Analysis of the Interactional Interface in Brazilian Catholic Online Rituals

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Abstract

Through digital technologies, a new form of communicational interaction between the user and the sacred occurs in an online religious experience. This phenomenon is illustrated in practice by numerous religious services present in the online Catholic environment, which manifest new modes of discourse and religious practices, beyond the scope of the traditional church – what I term here “online rituals” – marked by a process of mediatization of religion. In this paper, from a *corpus* of four Brazilian websites, I analyze key concepts for the understanding of this phenomenon, including digital mediatization and interface. I examine, in these Brazilian Catholic websites, the communicational configurations of the religious experience from five areas of the interactional interface: the screen; peripherals; the organizational structure of content on websites; the graphic composition of the webpages; and possible interface failures. Finally, I examine a shift in the communicational dynamics of religion today, marked by new materialities present in online religious rituals.

About the Author

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1. Introduction

There is, nowadays, through digital technologies and the internet, the configuration of a new form of communicational interaction between religious practitioners and the sacred. In online spaces, people begin to find offers of religious symbols, services and rituals that point to the transcendent dimensions of life, to the “Totally Other”, to the “*superior summo meo*,” to the Mystery, to God (Boff, 2002), “something *totaliter aliter* as compared to ordinary, profane human life” (Berger, 1990, p. 87). In other words, in these online rituals and practices, filled with religious symbols (Jesus, Mary, saints, angels, etc.), the users can experience the presence of the divine in a digital religious environment. If mediatic communication (its rationale, devices, and processes) is in constant evolution, then by appropriating it, religion also follows this trend and is compelled to become something different than it traditionally was.

If a religious experience is an experience of the presence of the sacred (Martelli, 1995), it can be also understood as an *interaction* between the “I” and a sacred “Other”. This interaction happens because the “Other” manifests itself to the “I”, who experiences this relationship with the “Other” as a sacred manifestation. With the emergence of a new religious environment and experience through digital networks, the sacred is experienced not only in stone churches and tangible rituals, but also in the bits and pixels of the internet. The believer, in front of a device connected to the internet,

develops an online kind of “interior relationship with a transcendent reality” (Martelli, 1995, 135)¹, within a new environment of worship on the Web.

This whole phenomenon is illustrated by the existence, in the Catholic online environment², of numerous online services that offer new possibilities for religious practices outside of the traditional church. These services are relocated and redefined in the so-called “virtual chapels” of Catholic websites: offering prayer requests by internet; “virtual candles”; audio and video programs, such as masses and lectures; online versions of the Bible and prayers; counseling and guidance with religious leaders; and many other options. Online rituals are precisely these acts and practices of faith developed by the believer through operations of meaning construction in interaction with the online communication system.

By “online communication system”, I understand a complex and organized set of communicational and religious elements in interaction in Catholic websites: the graphic, discursive, symbolic, and technological elements that constitute the pages as they are. All these online rituals are possible through the internet because of the presence of an interface that enables this interaction, through material (screen, keyboard, mouse) and symbolic (browsers, menus, environments) devices with their own logic and protocols.

The rationale underlying these online religious practices is characterized by a process of mediatization, a socio-historical process in which media becomes a “mark, model, matrix, and rationality which produce and structure meaning” (Mata 1999, 84). Through this process, “religion is increasingly being subsumed to the logic of the media” (Hjarvard 2008, 11). Today, therefore, religion can no longer be explained or understood without taking into account the role of the media (Sbardelotto 2012).

In this paper, I examine key concepts to help comprehend this phenomenon, including digital mediatization and interface. Then I analyze the role of the interactional

interface³ on its technological and symbolic levels in the religious experience in online rituals of a *corpus* of four Brazilian Catholic websites, a sample that represents a much bigger and more complex totality. They are: the website of the Brazilian National Shrine and its communication network (A12)⁴; of a large religious congregation (Sisters Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus - Province of Paraná)⁵; of a “personality” who is an ordained representative of the Brazilian Church (Father Reginaldo Manzotti)⁶; and of a Catholic lay association and movement (CatolicaNet)⁷. I describe five levels of interactional interface: the screen; peripheral devices like keyboard and mouse; the organizational structure of the information (menus); the graphic layout of the webpages; and, finally, possible interface failures. As a conclusion, I reflect upon new materialities of religion in the contemporary process of digital mediatization.

2. Mediatization of Religion: Exploring Communicational Processes

This new environment for the construction of social and personal meaning through the media was somewhat foreshadowed by McLuhan (1964, 10), when he stated that “every technology gradually creates a totally new human environment.” These environments, according to McLuhan, “are not passive wraps, but active processes.” In short, “society perceives, and perceives itself, through the media phenomenon, now extended beyond traditional technological devices” (Gomes 2008, 21). As a widespread social phenomenon, religion is also embedded in these protocols.

With advances in technology and correlated new social processes, “an *acceleration* and a *diversification* of the ways in which society interacts with society” is increasingly noticeable (Braga 2012, 35). In this context, I understand the concept of *mediatization* as a socio-historical-communicational phenomenon. In general,

mediatization can be understood as a meta-process, according to Krotz (2007), who defines meta-processes as “constructs which describe and explain theoretically specific economic, social and cultural dimensions and levels of the current change” (Krotz 2007, 257). Historical examples of meta-processes are urbanization, secularization and globalization. These processes last for centuries and are not necessarily confined to a particular area or culture, nor is it known exactly when they start or end. Mediatization therefore can be understood as a communicational meta-process that helps us understand contemporary society, from the social transformation that is triggered by media dynamics, logics, and processes.

Today, the media are a “mark, model, matrix, rationality which produce and structure meaning” (Mata 1999, 84). The media are no longer only an extension of man, but the environment in which everything moves, including religion: a new “virtual bios,” “a principle, a model, and an activity of social intelligibility operation” (Gomes 2010, 21). However, from this point of view, the media cannot be understood only as a technological support of communication – electronic devices and digital networks, for example, are not merely technological innovations. According to Verón (1997, 12), the media are understood as “a technological device of message production/reproduction *associated with certain conditions of production and certain modes (or practices) of reception of these messages*” (emphasis added). These “conditions of production and modes of reception” are precisely the *social uses* applied to these technical devices, since the medium “entails the articulation of a communication technology to *specific modes of use* (production and reception)” (Verón 1997, 12, emphasis added), which can be many and varied. It is important to realize how these innovations are “used,” how they are appropriated by society, in other words, how society becomes embedded by communicational protocols for the construction of meaning. Here therefore I understand media as “*socio-technical and socio-symbolic dispositifs*” (Miège 2009, 110), namely,

complex communicational sets of social and technical elements appropriated by society through various social uses and practices for the construction of symbolic meaning. It is from this perspective on media that the phenomenon of mediatization is triggered.

This phenomenon manifests a specific socio-communicational logic and a specific socio-organizational nature: media logics implemented by individuals, groups and institutions, unleashing social effects. Thus, the scope of religion and religious practices start to be reshaped and reconstructed from this phenomenon – a process of mediatization of religion. This process demonstrates that “media can at the same time be a *source* of religion and spirituality, an *indicator* of religious and spiritual change, and *articulated into* religious and spiritual trends – *changing religion* through those interactions and also *being changed* by that relationship” (Hoover 2008, 4).

In this sense, mediatization of religion is a “historical process [in which] the media has taken over many of the social functions that used to be performed by the religious institutions” (Hjarvard 2008, 10), while “religion is increasingly being subsumed to the logic of the media, both in terms of institutional regulation, symbolic content and individual practices” (Hjarvard 2008, 11). The media are now an environment for living and practicing the faith through strategies developed by religious institutions, which are permeated by mediatic logic and operations.

Additionally, what emerges from the media is not only a form of practicing religion, but also of *being religious* (Gomes 2004). This reality manifests itself, perhaps with more clarification, within the internet, in which there is a shift and a new symbolic construction by the user. Nevertheless, even before any possible interaction between user and system, there are some technical and symbolic elements that shape this relationship and also interfere with the construction of the religious meaning of the online religious experience. This is the interposition of technique (Luhmann, 2005),

which manifests itself in the interaction between the believer and Catholic websites through an interactive interface.

3. Interactional Interface: New Materialities of the Sacred

The religious symbols and rituals accessed by the believer on the internet pass through several levels of *codification* by the system. That is, the interaction is made possible because the user “decodes” the configuration offered by the system. This decoding goes beyond a mere reception of messages issued by the online Catholic system. It involves several levels of *reconstruction* by the user of what is provided by the system, through various elements that allow him/her, among all digital protocols, to recognize a manifestation of the sacred and to experience it. In short, the interface is the “place” of the interaction.

This happens through material devices (screen, keyboard, mouse) and symbolic apparatuses (browsers, menus, environments). With them, the user “manipulates” the sacred elements and symbols offered and organized by the system, navigating its intricacies the way he/she likes; a grammar of actions on “a field of possibilities whose proportions are large enough to give the impression of infinity” (Santaella 2004, 163).

The interface, therefore, is the *technological point of contact between user and the system* and also the *symbolic code that enables this interaction*. In a narrower sense, I refer here to the computer graphic interface of the websites, the “non-textual” elements in the system – such as the layout and internal organization of the information available on it – and the material dimension of the media that guides the construction of meaning and the religious experience of the believer. It is through the interface that the user

interacts with the system. The system tells the user his/her limits and possibilities, and the user communicates to the system his/her wants and needs.

“The computer interface acts as a code which carries cultural messages in a variety of media. When you use the internet, everything you access – texts, music, video, navigable spaces – passes through the interface of the browser and then, in turn, the interface of the OS [operational system]” (Manovich 2000, 64). However, it is important to clarify that these “transport mechanisms” are rarely neutral or automatic: they carry meaning and affect the message being conveyed, as well as the user experience. The interface provided by the system programmer shapes, within its limits, the way the believer can interpret religious symbols accessed through the internet and also provides predetermined decoding lines for the religious meaning of these symbols since it organizes them in a certain way on the layout of the pages and on their menus. Other settings are provided even earlier, by the computer language, as possible ways of dealing with the information available: “click”, “cut”, “paste”, “copy”, “delete”, “access”, etc. As Scolari (2004, 239) synthesizes, “we believe we use interfaces, but in reality they are also modeling us.”

Nevertheless, no system works or is used as initially predicted by the programmer. The system establishes a *field of possible interactions* in which the user navigates autonomously in a constant “fight” between the system strategies of meaning (offerings of encounter with the sacred) in its interface, and tactics of the user (desires, needs, and actions). This field, however, can be transgressed in situations where the user either *abuses* the system – not corresponding to its proposals – or *abandons* it in search of other “seas of navigation.” Therefore, even though the user possibilities are delimited by the system, the user still can overcome them and seek new opportunities.

The interface activation, hence, happens by the “click” of the user: it is he/she who *makes the interface work*; it is he/she who *updates it* from the virtual uses

programmed by the programmer. Without it, the interface only virtually exists. In the case of religious experience, the user triggers the interface proceedings, allows the symbols to “speak,” and liberates the sacred stored in the “basements” of the internet. “The navigation answers to our choices” (Santaella 2003, 93).

To better understand the role of the interface in online rituals, I will examine here five levels of the interactional interface in our *corpus*: 1) the screen, 2) peripherals such as keyboard and mouse, 3) the organizational structure of content, 4) the graphic layout of the pages on which Catholic services and rituals are available, and 5) the possible interface failures generated by a misuse of the operating system.

3.1 Screen

At the first interactional interface level, the user connects to the system through a screen, either fixed, as in the case of a personal computer, or mobile, such as cell phones and other devices. Connected to the network, the screen becomes an access window to distant places; through it, the system *speaks to* the user and *points to the sacred*, and the user *immerses him/herself in* this “broad sea” of navigation.

The screen also demands the full attention of the user to what lies within its frame, ignoring the physical space “outside” of it: the screen filters and tries to turn nonexistent everything that is not within its framework. In front of a screen, the user gives the system “permission” to direct his/her gaze through the meanders of the sacred. Unlike a territorialized church, for example, where we have a comprehensive view of the whole space and gradually direct our gaze to what attracts us the most, the user, connected to the system, looks at what it allows him/her to see on the screen, according to hierarchical frameworks offered by the system and its menus.

Besides the “window” of the screen, other internal windows inside the computer screen – programs and other computer applications – frame certain content, separating it

from others. Inside the screen, there is a summation of windows (of various programs, multiple windows of the same program, or multiple frames within a single window, etc.), each one referring to a different “world” in which the user is asked to do different things. It is up to him/her to manage these offerings, granting them the importance and the relevance that seem most appropriate to him/her. A specific *regime of vision* is established in digital environments.

The screen becomes an access window to the sacred, as seen on the “Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament” link⁸ from the “Virtual Chapel” of the website of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In this service, the system shows a picture of the physical space of a chapel of the offline environment, with empty seats, a red carpet that covers the floor, the sunlight entering through the windows on the right, sacred paintings on the left, and ahead, the altar with candles and flowers. After an automatic animation that shows the lighting of candles and the opening of the door of the tabernacle⁹, a monstrance¹⁰ exposes the consecrated host, which, for the Catholic faith, is the real presence of the body of Christ (Fig. 1 and 2).

Figura 1 - Screenshot of a ritual on the website of the Apostles before the automatic animation

Figura 2 - Screenshot of a ritual of the website of the Apostles after the automatic animation

In front of this screen, the user gives the system “permission” to direct his/her gaze in “worship” to the host. The user looks at what the system allows him/her to see – utterly alone, in “private”, as indicated by the empty pews. After the initial animation,

the lights of the candles and the bright aura of the monstrance continue flickering, creating a sensation of sacredness, that something mysterious or divine is happening “live” before the eyes of the believer.

In this case, the screen becomes “a window through which we can enter places thousands of miles away” (Manovich 2000, 94). Through the screen, digital and physical environments appear to coincide, as the user *feels like he/she is present* in the chapel, wherever it is located. The communicational technology used to create this online religious experience may become *transparent* to the user: the screen may “disappear” to the user, for he/she only sees (and only sees himself/herself in) the online environment. With the addition of the sound system of the computer, the experience is even more realistic since the ambient sound or sacred music foster a religious environment and surround the prayer of the user. The sensation of sacredness is also generated by the inter-relationships between these communicational procedures provided by the system, and the intentions of the user along the navigation. The more effective the communication interface (the features of its “screen”), the stronger this feeling, and, therefore, the more transparent the technical details for the user.

3.2 *Peripherals*

In a second level of the interactional interface, we analyze the role of other peripherals such as keyboard and mouse. Through them, the computer is “transformed into an intelligent being capable of engaging us in dialogue” (Manovich 2000, 94). Through the peripherals, the user communicates with the system and expresses his/her presence inside it. The keyboard and mouse allow him/her to have an even greater level of interaction with a digital sanctuary than just with the screen, because the user can tell the system what he/she wants to do by using the buttons of the peripherals to open new pages and to navigate in this online environment.

The keyboard, for example, is the apparatus by which the user says something to the system, whereby the individual communicates with the computer. In some cases, it is necessary that the user knows the common codes to make himself/herself understood by the system (certain software may have keyboard shortcuts, for example). The user *speaks* to the system through the fingertips and keys, ordering the operations it must perform.

On the other hand, the cursor displayed on the screen – in the form of an arrow over the contents in general, or as a hand with the first finger pointing up when over a link – is an invitation to the user to ask the system to do certain things through the click of the mouse, a kind of extension of the sense of touch in the digital environment, which allows the user to interact with digitized objects. The cursor also situates the user within the contents of the digital page, telling him/her where to put his/her attention; through its shape (an arrow or a hand), it tells him/her what content is static or dynamic (linked). On touch screens, furthermore, the actual finger of the user is transformed into a cursor. In this case, the sense of touch gains a new meaning, transforming the finger in a “peripheral” that *makes the digital system do* things, that operates the digital system by touching it. Thus, either through a click of a cursor or the touch of a finger, the system enables the believer to *handle* the digital environment.

Religious experience online involves a different set of senses from religious experience offline. The digital interface, permeated by the logic and protocols of the internet and computer language, develops a kind of synthesis in which all senses pass through eyes and fingers. Thus, the online religious experience involves a particular *sensorium* of the digital life, which has a profound impact on the formation of religious identity.

These interface devices establish an interactional dynamic, i.e., a specific *regime of action* for the user. Through these interfaces, the user cannot interact with the system

however he/she wants, but only by using a particular type of molded, conditioned, and regulated bond – albeit with possible escapes.

During the online religious experience of the believer, the technology may be *transparent* to him/her. Not being able to deal with countless tasks at the same time, the user needs to automate some of them so that others can be controlled efficiently. The actions of pressing buttons or touching screens become, almost imperceptibly, coextensive gestures of the online religious practice. When the user focuses on the reading of a prayer or on participation in an online ritual, the movement of his/her hand on the keyboard, mouse, or screen may become automatic, without needing to think about it, and the technology (in this case, the peripherals) “disappears.” In this sense, the best prosthesis is the one that becomes *transparent* to the person during its use, because it allows the user to focus only on the desired, final action, not on the *functioning* of it.

3.3 *Organizational Structure of Contents*

On a third level of the interactional interface, I examine the organization and structure of the contents offered to the user. First, this structure is only possible due to specific computer programs that allow access to the internet. The grammar of the computer interface is composed of – and crystallizes in – “menus”, i.e., catalogs with many options that direct the user to other programs, applications and internet links.

Like many other websites, the Catholic webpages studied here are marked by an organizational structure in this form of catalog/menu, which allows the selection of and access to specific items within a large database. Through this structure, the system indicates to the user a “navigation map,” and the user, interpreting it according to his/her desires and interests, navigates inside it. That is, the user receives from the system a certain influence on the access to information and a certain degree of control

and conditioning of the results to be obtained. In short, the user chooses certain things in a number of pre-defined menus.

Besides being a way of organizing the internal contents, the composition of themed menus chosen by these websites is also a way to prioritize their content according to a certain structure, placing the content that is considered more important by the system toward the top-left corner of the webpage in an attempt to direct the selection that will be made by the user. Accordingly, elements that point to the sacred become options to select, offered among many others. The user has access to those elements through a certain organization of the information on the websites, through a specific path offered by the system, which might highlight one offering or “hide” it under other links. The interactional interface, therefore, promotes elements that point to the sacred (like online rituals) as having a certain level of importance relative to other options provided by the same websites.

Religious institutions need to adapt their content and services to be present in the online environment, defining themselves through menus and protocols. This leads them towards a certain reductionism, as a website does not summarize and cannot contain everything that an institution is, and online religious services cannot summarize or contain all the religious meaning of a territorialized ritual. This reductionism entails a minimalizing of the diversity and complexity of the elements that point to the sacred. What is offered on a website has undergone a prior selection by the system and is offered according to criteria of importance and hierarchy, which, in turn, also predict the user's selections.

The believer is faced with a *logic of selection*, which leads to a new form of control by the system. As Manovich (2000, 224) says, “the computer age brought with it a new cultural algorithm: reality → media → data → database.” The notion of database as a structured collection of data is a key idea for understanding the phenomenon of

digitization. Thus, what computers (and especially complex digital networks) allow is a particular way of organizing content, providing data to be quickly searched and found. The database is a cultural form that helps us understand how the user relates to these data collections and their menus: visualizing them, navigating through them, searching for them, and selecting them.

However, the database of a Catholic website is not just like a library or a collection of paper documents. On the internet, a user can search and access any element almost instantly (as long as he/she holds the knowledge to accomplish such a task), and in any media (text, picture, video, audio etc.). The internet can be an endless collection of elements that point to the sacred for religious practitioners who so desire. In order to avoid a collection that is intricate, chaotic and unstructured, menus operate as a sequential list of database elements. They are an organized, hierarchical and guiding form of access to the content.

Therefore, interactional interface *grammars* are established, which are specific to the digital age and are present in other computer programs and applications. In a chapel on the corner of a street, for example, there are no menus where we can select certain rituals to occur automatically. We cannot press a button to make the consecrated host appear to us when we want to worship it.

From all this content organization, what does it mean to select a particular link that directs the user to a specific menu option of a website? It could be said that the user, in this case, makes a decision, makes a choice, and therefore is *free*. However, by pressing a specific key or selecting a particular link, the user triggers a process that was already *programmed by the program*, or *systematized by the system*. It is an option preset by the online Catholic system. It is a programmed freedom, a prescribed choice of possibilities (Flusser, 2007). It is no coincidence that websites often make it very

clear on their homepage that *there is a developer, a programmer* behind the structure of the site.

However, in a more complex perspective, the *final construction* of religious meaning by the user will be co-authored by him/her along with the system. The latter invites the user to select and to do certain things and to go certain ways, but it is up to the user to make their selection, thus updating the final map of the chosen paths. These specific paths are part of a larger “whole” of the online Catholic system. However, from link to link, the user goes through the system database following a *certain path* created from his/her personal desires and the invitations made by the system. In addition, this specific path of the user manifests itself in a paradoxical way: always conditioned by the system (something *already given*) and always beyond any conditioning (something that *may be*).

Embedded by the logic of selection, the believer’s experience of the sacred through the internet “obeys” the system framework of menus and digital catalogs, and the user selects what corresponds more to his/her desires and interests. Hence, interacting, user and system recondition the circulation (construction and reconstruction) of the religious message, giving it new meanings, beyond the limitations imposed by the system and beyond the specific interests or needs of the user.

3.4 *Graphic Layout*

In a fourth level of the interactional interface, I analyze the graphic composition of the webpages of Catholic websites. First, I describe the transmutation of elements that point to the sacred from the offline environment to the internet: that is, offline images, photos and videos that are digitized and re-signified to the online environment. Secondly, I analyze the digital composition of these elements. Finally, I examine the combination of digital and non-digital elements, digitally scanned elements of the

external world and computer generated elements. What is common to all these elements – and everything that is part of the online digital world – is their fluidity: everything can be inserted, modified, replaced or simply deleted by the system with a simple computer command.

The “Virtual Chapel” of the website of Father Manzotti, for example, went through a reformulation in 2011, changing its name to “Virtual Shrine of Merciful Jesus”¹¹. This “elevation” from a simple chapel to a shrine – i.e., no longer just a private “little church”, but a public *temple* – occurred without any Catholic official intervention. It depended only on a digital, graphic reconstruction. Its previous version was composed of three main graphics (Fig. 3).

Figura 3 - Screenshot of the “Virtual Chapel” of the webpage of Fr. Reginaldo Manzotti

At the top, the logo of the chapel was displayed with the inscription “Virtual Chapel of Father Reginaldo Manzotti”, with a photo of a stained glass window from an offline church in the background, and a photo of the priest in ritual robes, holding a cross. The symbolic construction thus referred the user to a kind of “private chapel” of the priest that is available to the community of believers/users (“*Bem-vindo à Capela Virtual*”, “Welcome to the Virtual Chapel”). This feeling was reinforced by the presence of the priest’s photo heading the page and the logo indicating that this is the “Virtual Chapel of Father Reginaldo Manzotti,” and not any other chapel. The images of the stained glass, the cross and the angel help the graphic composition to create an aura of something sacred, a sensation of sacredness.

In the new version of the chapel, the graphic composition focuses on the image of Merciful Jesus (Fig. 4).

Figura 4 - Homepage of the “Virtual Shrine of Merciful Jesus”

The photo of the priest is no longer present, and the image and the title “Merciful Jesus” stand out over other elements. Just below the image, there is the phrase “Jesus, I trust in You.” Therefore, this “virtual shrine” refers only to Merciful Jesus, while maintaining its connection with Father Manzotti’s website through the green tab that overlaps the entire graphical page layout, which indicates the inscription “Back to Father Reginaldo Manzotti’s portal.” Unlike the previous version, the background music does not start automatically. Now, the user has at his/her disposal a music player in the upper right corner, waiting for the user to press the *play* button. When this device is activated, the system begins to perform an anthem to “Merciful Jesus.” When making use of this new processuality, the system aims to increase the sensation of sacredness of the digital environment by promoting other kind of stimuli, not only visual-textual but also musical, to its possible user.

Another interesting case is the “Virtual Chapel” of the Apostles (Fig. 5)¹² and the CatolicaNet website (Fig. 6)¹³, in both of which the “Virtual Candles” ritual shows the images of older candles already “consumed,” “melted” by time.

Figura 5 - “Consumed by time” candles on the Apostles of the Sacred Heart website

Figura 6 - “Consumed by time” candles on the CatolicaNet website

This also helps to reconstruct the sensation of sacredness for the believer, as the “virtual candles,” like wax candles, “melt” and will be consumed over each passing day of the ritual until they are finally removed from the system. In these cases, it is interesting to realize that “the old interfaces always leave their footprints in the new environments of interaction. The interfaces and the devices that compose them never disappear: they recombine with each other to generate new interfaces” (Scolari 2004, 231). The final interface that emerges from the recombination of the “wax interface” with the digital interface of the candles re-signifies some elements, such as the length and melting time of the candles, to the digital environment. In this sense, we can speak of a *co-evolution of interfaces* (wax and digital), in which the former continue to leave their marks and traces on the new interfaces, and, especially in the digital environment, any interface can interact with the others.

Through the graphical composition of the interactional interface, the user relates to encoded and digitized elements that point to the sacred, re-signified to the online

environment. He/she relates to numbers – *interconnected*, *linked* numbers that give form to the meanings, symbols and messages constructed by the system. In this sense, with digital media, there is a qualitative leap with respect to earlier information organization operations.

The very principle of hyper-linking, which forms the basis of interactive media, objectifies the process of association, often taken to be central to human thinking. Mental processes of reflection, problem solving, recall, and association are externalized, equated with following a link, moving to a new page, choosing a new image, or a new scene. Before we would look at an image and mentally follow our own private associations to other images. Now interactive computer media asks us instead to click on an image in order to go to another image. Before we would read a sentence of a story or a line of a poem and think of other lines, images, memories. Now interactive media asks us to click on the highlighted sentence to go to another sentence. In short, we are asked to follow pre-programmed, objectively existing associations (Manovich 2000, 61).

In the cases cited before, the ability of the system to develop graphical techniques to create a single convincing image becomes explicit, bringing together “physically available” elements and computer created, “physically non-existent” elements. The system mixes and matches elements that point to the sacred in a way that would be unfamiliar to the traditional religious practitioner. So far, in the offline environment, automated chapels have not been created that recognize the entrance of the believer in their interiors and initiate religious rituals without human interference. This is the case for the online adoration of the Blessed Sacrament available on the website of the Apostles.

On the websites I have considered, elements that point to the sacred online and offline are synthesized in formats that please the system programmer and seem to him/her to be easier for the user to access, so that the navigation and the construction of meaning correspond to the choice of the user. Thus, online experience of the sacred depends on *re-reading* and *co-construction* by the user, creating a hyper-narrative of the sacred from the links available by the online Catholic system according to his/her

choices of interaction. These choices are random and not wholly predictable, since they are born in the very act of interacting with technical processualities.

As we have seen, the materiality and the performance of online rituals depend on a constant interaction between system and user through certain interfaces. Nevertheless, sometimes not everything happens as expected. This is when failures occur in the interface.

3.5 *Interface Failures*

The access of the user to online religious environments occurs under certain conditions – rules – that attempt to regulate the religious experience of the believer. The interactional structure imposes certain limits on the user's experience. This type of ruling establishes the form of interaction, but also the user's access and conditions of expression, to avoid a rupture in the interactional contract. Nevertheless, sometimes this rupture occurs and, when it occurs, it shows that the online Catholic system is not totally free of lapses caused by the action of the users.

I refer here to the *ruptures*, *breakdowns* and *failures* in the graphic and diagrammatic composition of the interactional interface of the Catholic websites. In the cases below, we see some examples of these failures in the ritual “Virtual Candle”¹⁴ from the “Virtual Chapel” of the A12 website (Fig. 7) and in the previous version of the “Virtual Chapel” of Father Manzotti's website (Fig. 8).

Figura 7 - An interface failure in the "Virtual Chapel" on A12 website

Figura 8 - An interface failure in the "Virtual Chapel" on Father Manzotti's website

In such cases, the user causes a failure in the graphic composition of the interactional interface, since the text written by the user exceeds the diagrammatic limit set by the system. It “breaks up” the interface. In the first case, the system fails in its selection of content, allowing the user to express himself/herself numerous and repeated times. This creates a “discomfort” for other users, who realize that something “went wrong” in the procedures of the system.

From these cases, other users may perceive a “flaw”. They may realize that there is a communicational technology that manages the system, and that this technology is

not fully effective. The sensation of sacredness built by these websites could cause the user to feel that they are interacting directly with God, abstracting the technology through which this interaction is taking place. However, from these interface failures it is possible to see that something *does not work* or is not properly fulfilling its function.

In these moments of crisis in the system, the properties of this technology and its procedures become *visible* to the user. Through them, it is possible to see aspects that may not be evident when the operation is normal and the technology appears to be transparent. “When the user makes the interface do things unforeseen, he/she is creating a new interface. [...] Often in those unexpected uses are hidden new forms of interaction or functions that were not part of the programmer's mental model” (Scolari 2004, 231). Thanks to these failures, new features, properties and areas of action of the objects are revealed.

Discovering these failures allow the programmer to improve the communicational interface, identifying its weaknesses, in order to prevent the disclosure of the internal processes of the system. In this sense, when I talked before about co-evolution, I was also referring to the *dialectical tension* between how the system is *conceived* and *designed*, and how the believer *uses* it in practice. Technologies are never used entirely as their programmers expected.

This tension is one of the engines that boost the evolution of interfaces, because by deviating from the intended uses of the programmer or finding and promoting failures and flaws in the system the user is performing an empirical creative work. The user is *virtually* recreating and redesigning the interface, since the update of this recreation will be made by the programmer of the system. “Deviation, disturbance, and dissipation can cause the ‘structure’, i.e., organization and disorder at the same time,” since the system “constitute[s] its order and its organization in turbulence, instability, deviation.” The system “builds itself with disorder: the *order from noise principle*”

(Morin 2002, 61-62). Failure is also a creative disorder, which points to the evolution of the system.

4. Conclusion

What we can see from this analysis is that the faith lived, practiced and experienced in digital environments points to a change in the religious experience of the user and in the manifestation of the religious, through new materialities, centrally marked by mediatic logics.

If the internet brings with it new ways of dealing with *time, space, speech, rituals*, and *materialities* of the sacred (Sbardelotto, 2012), religiosity as we traditionally know it is also changing. The “new religion” that unfolds before us in this “new wineskin” also brings a “new wine”¹⁵ characterized by digital mediatization, including characteristic ways of being, existing, thinking, learning and acting in the digital age. Along with the development of the new medium of the internet, a new experience of the sacred (the manifestation, expression, and perception of the numinous) and new religiosities (various actions and practices of interaction with the sacred) are also emerging.

This new experience of the sacred brings a very peculiar materiality: a numeric one, made of digits, which can be altered, recombined, deleted according to the will of the system, in order to generate a more emphatic sensation of sacredness in the online religious experience of the user. This symbolic construction of the sacred in the digital environment, with numerical and binary digits (bits), and fluid and soft codes (software), can be constantly reconstructed and changed according to the interests of the system and the user.

“The internet may be changing many of the basic religious/spiritual sensibilities of users, but sometimes in ways that actually mark a return to an historically earlier understanding of religious experiences and life” (Dawson 2004, 4). In digital materialities some remnants of a pre-mediatic religiosity can be found, such as the use of candles, which show that the complexity of technology does not require the abandonment of discursive traditions. In a “virtual chapel,” the sun always shines, the flowers are always blooming, bright and colorful, the candles automatically light themselves, and the ceremony begins as soon as the believer enters the temple. Some digital candles also “consume” themselves, decreasing in size during the ritual, but there is no longer the “nuisance” of melted wax, smoke or fire risks.

If humans, over the centuries, symbolically constructed the meaning of the sacred with fire, and the meaning of fire with candles, today the candle is symbolically reconstructed by its digital materiality. The internet, a symbolic medium of post-modernity, helps users to live a faith also marked by pre-modern and traditional elements. Creating these new symbols and redefining other traditional signs to fit the online environment, a new “mediation” arises between the religious practitioner and the world, through which the world is given a sacred meaning.

We question the supposed “disintermediation” (Lévy 1999) promoted by digital media, as if the believer lived a “direct” relationship with God, without the traditional mediations. In fact, the religious practitioner faces, often without realizing it, new intermediations – even *reintermediations* – with the sacred. The online system and its protocols arise as new “intermediating layers” between the believer and the sacred. If before the religious practitioner made use of a wax candle, of fire, of a territorialized temple and the protocols of the institution to make his/her ritual prayer, today even more layers are added, technological and communicational layers, devices like the

computer, screen, keyboard, mouse, interfaces, discursive rules and “digital liturgies”, used by the believer in relation to the religious offerings of the online system.

Precisely because of the shortcomings of bits and pixels, the online Catholic system attempts to radicalize the fullest sensation of sacredness, making use of all the possibilities of digital *sensorium* including animations, music and clicks, to encourage more effective interaction. All of this guides the user to give a sacred meaning to their interaction with the system, and to see technological mediation as a legitimate path for interaction with the sacred.

The user’s “reading” of the digital sacred is a *co-construction* of his/her religious experience from his/her random and unpredictable choices in the online environment (together with the given symbolic construction of the system). While bits and pixels try to “condense”, to “reduce” the complexity of the religious meaning of the sacred to fit the digital environment, they are re-signified *through the interaction with the user*. In this sense, it is not the information itself that matters, because it alone is a “hollow improbability,” a “hollow entity” (Morin 2002, 413). “Information [...] is not knowledge, because knowledge is the result of the organization of information” (Morin 2011, online). Today, “we have an overload of information and an insufficiency of organization, hence a lack of knowledge [...] Comprehension is not linked to the materiality of communication, but to the social, the political, the existential,” to other things beyond the mere technological mediations of the media.

To understand online religious experience, we must be alert to the *multi-relationality of information* (Morin 2002). It is the *organization*, the *articulation*, the *association*, the *embodiment* of the digital materialities of the sacred in the “lived life” of the user, with its social, political and existential aspects, that can lead him/her to a religious experience, not merely digital information or its support.

Instead of a logic of substitution, faith is faced with a *logic of complexification* in digital environments. In today's religiosities, we can glimpse signs of an interpenetration between the online and offline systems. The internet does not "replace" the material and symbolic means of traditional faith practices, but it is already generating new modes of perception, expression, practice, living, and experiencing faith. There is no need to fear the disappearance of the body in digital ritual, because the body remains a performer and a central agent of the meanings offered in the digital era. The human body itself is the "'coprocessor' of digital information" (Lenoir 2004, xxvi). Nonetheless, "technology [is] an extension of human capability that enlarges the grasp over the material world" and "alter[s] the very basis of our sensory experience, drastically affect what it means to live as *embodied* human agents" (Lenoir 2004, xxvix).

The core of digital interfaces of religion is the *communicational dimension* of online religious experiences. These experiences are, above all, *relational* ones. Religious experience is the *interaction/relationship/reconnection* between the individual and the sacred. In societies in mediatization, there are new relational processes and communicational circuits that interconnect the user, the sacred, and the audience to which the user narrates his/her religious experience. On the internet, new modalities of *perception* and *expression* of the sacred begin to arise in new environments of worship, enabling *diverse and diffuse* religious experiences which consummate themselves *in their communication* to others.

From the perspective of mediatization, two central shifts begin to occur in the religious sphere. First, the religious practitioner can access and involve a much wider audience, which stimulates a more diverse offering of religious products and services. Second, religious experiences begin to disperse themselves amid various communicational possibilities, no longer dependent on a specific ritual or temple.

Online interactions between the user and the sacred are recognizable by the “structures” of the interface that enable them to occur, as well as by the narrations of users themselves: *something happens, and something sacred*. In the mediation of the online system, there are possibilities and impossibilities, facets of the sacred that are most evident, and others that are less evident, religious experiences that are fostered, and others that are not. All of that is marked by the determinations and choices of the programmer and the online system itself as a whole. This is a sacred that is not *there*, but that reveals itself and is discovered *through interactions* with users.

Through the mediatization of religion, only some facets of the sacred are revealed. However, the sacred is not limited to those mediated facets. Alongside online environments, people continue to live, practice, and experiment with faith in traditional places of worship, which are themselves undergoing developments. Online faith lives together with, challenges, and is challenged by the dynamics and transformations of religion and religiosity within the social, political and cultural conditions of contemporary society. In the cultural broth of societies in mediatization, religion is a diffuse and complex phenomenon, and popular religious practice is an important place of listening for researchers.

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¹ In this paper, all the quotations in non-English languages were freely translated by the author.

² The interest for the Catholic context in this paper is due to several factors. The results of the last Brazilian Demographic Census 2010 show a growth in diversity of religious groups. Even though the Catholic Church has lost followers (in 1872, 99.7% were Catholics), the religious profile of the Brazilian population remains Catholic: in 2010, the country still maintains its historic Catholic majority, with a percentage of 64.6% (data available in <http://migre.me/dXrg7>). Therefore, there is a great social-historical-cultural relevance of the Catholic Church in Brazil, in a scenario of great religious mobility and syncretism. On the other hand, a shift of the Catholic religious practices to the digital environment is noticeable: in only one of the websites analyzed here, more than 4,000 “virtual candles” are lit daily. This data alone points to a massive appropriation of the digital networks for a Catholic religious experience.

³ Our previous research (Sbardelotto, 2012) also analyzed the interactional operations between the user and the sacred from two other areas that favor the experience and practice of faith in online rituals in the digital environment: *discursive interactions* (spoken and written things); and *ritual interactions* (operations, acts and practices of the believer), which favor the offer of the sacred by the online Catholic system, and the appropriation developed by the user.

⁴ The A12 website is the official page of Aparecida Network, based at the National Shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida, also known as the Basilica of Our Lady of Aparecida, the patron saint of Brazil, located in São Paulo.

⁵ The website of the Institute of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus – Province of Parana gathers content on the congregation founded by Italian Clelia Merloni in 1894. The Province covers four States of South-Central Brazil and four Latin American countries: Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay.

⁶ Father Reginaldo Manzotti is the founder of *Evangelizar é Preciso*, a Catholic evangelization movement started in 2005. Manzotti is also director of two radio stations and two TV channels. He is the author of eight books and has released seven CDs and two DVDs

⁷ CatolicaNet is a “private association of the faithful of diocesan right” from the Diocese of Santo Amaro, in São Paulo, founded officially in 2002, but present on the Internet since 1999.

⁸ Available in <http://www.apostolas-pr.org.br/capela/adoracao_santissimo.htm>.

⁹ Liturgical furnishing used to house the consecrated hosts in Catholic churches; for Catholics, the hosts are the body of Jesus Christ.

¹⁰ Sacred object in which the consecrated host is exposed.

¹¹ Available in <http://www.apostolas-pr.org.br/capela/adoracao_santissimo.htm>.

¹²Available in <http://www.apostolas-pr.org.br/capela/acen_vela.htm>.

¹³Available in <<http://www.catolicanet.com/?system=velas>>.

¹⁴Available in <http://www.a12.com/santuario/capela/vela_virtual.asp>.

¹⁵ We refer here to the Gospel passage from Matthew 9:17, which says: "Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."