Virtualization of Ritual: Consequences and Meaning

Tetske van Dun, Peter Versteeg and Johan Roeland

Introduction

It is frequently argued that the authenticity of a religious ritual is in danger when practiced online because of the mundane and profane setting of the practitioner, which is usually a domestic space with a desk and a computer. This would easily distract the practitioner and create an “overload” of the mundane, possibly resulting in a loss of sacredness. However, in this contribution we base our argument on a tentative empirical journey made by one of the authors, and come to another conclusion. Following a broader trend of scholars who claim that the on- and offline worlds are intrinsically linked, we propose that the quality of an online ritual mainly lies in the realm of experience. Moreover, we argue that the authentication of an online ritual is highly dependent on the framework of previous ritual experiences acquired in the offline domain. We have seen in the aforementioned explorative qualitative research that people are capable of sacralising their personal surroundings by excluding mundane elements and introducing the sacred into their homes and work environments. However, this is only possible if they have had experience with such a mental and material transformation previously. Subjective interference is thus a key notion in understanding the way the ritual changes through virtualization.

About the Authenticity of Online Rituals

For a long time online religious rituals were viewed as less authentic, real or fulfilling than their offline counterparts in the broader scientific field of media and religion (Helland 2013: 28–29; Radde-Antweiler 2013: 88). In other words offline rituals have been understood as real while their online equivalents were regarded as fakes or flawed simulations (Radde-Antweiler 2013: 88) As is already implied in the very word of virtuality itself, with its connotations of unreal, fantastic, and illusionary, these pre-positions mirror a wider assumption with respect to the virtual world. Hence Helland argues that:

Next to authority, authenticity is one of the two main themes that determine the key questions in the study of online rituals – questions might be
Virtualization of Ritual: Consequences and Meaning

The realness of the online ritual is questioned for several reasons. First, assuming that rituals are (or should be) embodied practices, acted out in communal settings, online rituals are believed to be disembodied and highly individualized and thus unreal. Second, and related to the notion of embodiment: online rituals would lack the materiality and interphysicality (Cowan 2005) of the offline ritual, due to the digital mediation of the ritual (Cowan 2005; O’Leary 2005). Third, it is argued that the authenticity of a religious ritual is in danger when practiced online because of the mundane and profane setting of the practitioner – a domestic space with, say, a desk and a computer. This domestic place would easily distract the practitioner and create an “overload” of the mundane – resulting in a loss of sacredness. Thus, realness is in danger when the ritual is moved from its original space and time into the virtual world of the Internet.

Such reservations with respect to online rituals are often marked by what is known as the online/offline divide: a strong contrast between the offline and the online worlds, between real life and virtual life, between actual practices and computer mediated practices, whereby the mediated reality is always seen as inferior to the assumed “unmediated” one. However, more recently scholars have come to discuss this divide, acknowledging that the two worlds are becoming increasingly blended and the borders are becoming increasingly blurred. As a consequence one of the leading authorities in the field of media and religion, Heidi Campbell, seems to avoid the notion of “the virtual” and prefers the term digital religion. In doing so she acknowledges the fact that religion is not diminishing in online contexts, but is simply “constituted in new ways through digital media and cultures” (Campbell 2013: 3). She continues by saying that this:

(...) May lead to a new understanding of religion, one that is rooted in unique understandings and experiences of mediation of meaning via digital technology. (...) digital culture negotiates our understandings of religious practice in ways that can lead to new experiences, authenticity, and spiritual reflexivity’ (Campbell 2013: 3 italics by authors).

Campbell articulates a conviction shared by many present-day scholars working on media and religion, that the online realm offers real religious practices and experiences for many practitioners (Helland 2013: 12). Rachel Wagner, for instance, describes in her Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality (2012) the “deep similarities in form and function between many virtual reality...