



VIRTUALIZATION OF RELIGIOUS LIFE AND THE APOCALYPTIC SOCIETY (SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS)

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Abstract

The post-modern transformation of society painfully impacted religion. In this case, the religious mainstream changes drastically. Accordingly, mass culture becomes dominant in post-modern society. Rejection of “the great narratives” – and religion is one type of such great narratives, - entailed desacralization of religion and caused virtualization and profanation of the religious life which resulted in the cynical and contemptuous attitude to the radiational religious life, etc. All the stated, according to religious interpretation are signs of the apocalyptic society. In this case, the issue concerning the role of religion in the socius of this type becomes actual. And it is the main issue in this sociological sketch.

Keywords

Religion, Virtualization of the Religious Life, Profanation, Post-Modern Transformation of Religion, Apocalyptic Society, The Future of Religion

Introduction

The concept of the “virtual religion” is associated with the concepts of “virtual society” and “virtual man”. One of the issues vital to the future of religion is concerned with the new technologies. They, in their turn, are essential for the post-modern reality insofar as it concerns the replacement of the significance of industrial technology by information-communication technologies and this in its turn, means the disappearance of the existing reality. Its place is taken by a new reality that the contemporary technologies – television (which is already outdated), social nets and the contemporary media, which have developed tremendously, - offer to man. To perceive his/her existence man has to exist in this virtual world – on the communication screen, Facebook, Myspace etc. According to the post-modernist Baudrillard, media means, the industry of knowledge and entertainment dominate the contemporary society and have replaced the industrial society and its world of values. The net society manipulates the sign producing systems which denote nothing but themselves. A total virtual reality based on simulation, dissimulation and imitation, is being formed. It is a new reality – the so-called virtual reality – an artificial copy of the existing reality and has already received so much significance that the *genuine reality* has lost its meaning. In the language of sociology, it is called *the death of the social* (Baudrillard). From now on man is simulated – instead of a real man we are facing his simulation. In the virtual reality, man exists only as a digital representation since the only reality is a super-real virtual space: and this space rejects any other kind of reality. It is what we call “the death of man”.

Materials and Methods

The article is a theoretical-sociological research performed by using the method of logical analysis. It is based on the primary (J. Baudrillard, P. Berger, C. Glock, T. Luckmann, R. N. Bellah) and secondary sources on the theoretical problem under study.

In Detail about Results of the Research

Naturally, the virtualization of man and society influenced religion as well. This worried the sociologists and made them discuss the future of religion: what has the fate in store for religion in the post-classical virtual world? Pessimistic and nihilistic ideas regarding the future of religion are based on the growing influence of the contemporary newest information technologies. In this respect, several new terms have been coined in the sociology of religion to denote the processes ongoing in the sphere of religion. One of such terms though already a bit outdated is televangelism which implies using TV and media technologies to preach Gospel themes and in fact, is an American-Protestant version of the evangelical practice. The ultra-modern version of televangelism in this sphere is the internet practice. It belongs to the most painful and controversial issues. It is difficult to find a once and for all formulated position not only among the sociologists but among the representatives of the traditional religions as well. Two principal positions stand out: the followers of the first see in it an unimaginable transformation of religion, the end of the traditional religions and the beginning of a new, the so-called, virtual religion; those who share the second position, see no transformation of religion in these processes and consider the on-going processes only as an effective application of the contemporary means of communication and information transmission in the religious practice. According to this viewpoint, the nihilistic sociological theories purposefully aggravate the situation regarding the future of religion, or to say more clearly, everything is the result of the religious ignorance. But nowadays the virtualization of the religious life is already a fact and it, in its turn, makes its future rather pessimistic. It seems that there can be nothing alarming in using the computer technologies in preaching though things become more complicated when they try to apply it to the performance of the divine mysteries. We mean the mystery of confession. Virtualization of it is a new and unheard phenomenon which we encounter at present. It is where the problem of the finality of religion has its beginning. No matter how unacceptable it is from the religious viewpoint, this technology is widely exploited nowadays (the facts demonstrating it can be found in any sociology textbook). There are lots of programs which help to attend a virtual excursion around any temple in any part of the world without leaving our room; it may seem acceptable. But to light a virtual candle is inconceivable. From the religious viewpoint, it is the most serious sin, since in this case the religious act of bloodless sacrifice is profaned. But in a desecralized society where “religion turned into a special effect”, it becomes quite possible. Information space is only a superficial layer of man’s spiritual life; therefore, a virtual and cyber church will never replace a real temple. It is simply a parody and a simulation of a real church. Time will come when man escapes the slavery of this simulation and virtual reality and returns to the eternal truth and the genuine religious faith. It seems that serious exams are awaiting man who is hypnotized by the illusion of a pseudo-religion and a pseudo-faith. It is very easy to guess that a pseudo-religion constructed in the artificially created virtual space has no future; any experiment in this sphere is doomed to failure from the beginning. Religious life is a live interaction with the transcendent and this feature is lost in the case of virtualization. The virtual church will never be able to help a man who cannot go to church because of illness. The virtual church will not satisfy this man’s desperate desire to pray. Regarding the novelty of confessing via the Internet, believers may adapt to it, though it is interesting how the question of anonymity of confession will be solved. It can even become dangerous especially as it concerns man’s spiritual life: it resembles the behaviour of the doctor who has not seen his patient and still prescribes him a medicine. The function of confession is not limited only to absolving the sins: it also aims at returning the person to church. The virtual church, on the contrary, suppresses the desire to go to church. It distorts genuine religious feelings. Church is the body of Christ. To become part of this body one needs a live contact with it and internet confession hinders it. Regarding preaching and spreading the word of God, the internet can be suitable, though preaching is not simply MP3 format audio and video recording: it is a live word of God which is to be uttered from the pulpit. In addition, the internet has its rules of speech which do not correspond to the language of religious service. And the digital representation of religion is an absurdity and nothing more. In the analysis of these issues, reproaches of the contemporary authors towards the adherents of the classical theories should be also considered.

Conclusion

Summing up, we should state that to speak the language of the secular society in the post-secular epoch has no foundation. This certainly is to be considered, though not in the case of religion, since religion is an always new and always live phenomenon. According to the sociologists’ conclusions, nothing can replace man’s personal attitude to God which is best of all expressed in the traditional religious life. Therefore, a general conclusion in these circumstances can be the following: the process of transformation of society is a fact but from the religious viewpoint, it is not the fact that can question the existence of the world religions. The demand to rationalize, virtualize and govern the contemporary society on the basis of intellect supposedly will provoke a natural counter-reaction in the traditional religions and the society will again face the need for irrationalism and mystics. Such a situation will return the society to eternal values, enhance the process of discrediting the mass consciousness and will further expose the moral impotence of the omnipotent reason.

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