



Cyberspace and Evolution of Religiosity

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Abstract

Cyberspace is an electronic medium that generates, transfers, receives, processes, and deletes data. It has become an integral part of many people's lives, with different social, economic, entertainment, and educational aspects, serving various functions based on users' requirements. The impact of contemporary cyberspace and social media has expanded beyond virtual boundaries, transforming the physical world and society. In the digital age, cyberspace creates new cultural forms by changing culture and its components. Religiosity, as one of the main socio-cultural manifestations, is also affected by this process. This research aims to measure the scope and magnitude of the effects of cyberspace on religiosity. The study uses a descriptive-analytical method as well as Heidegger's and Baudrillard's approach to analyze the impacts of the virtual space on the evolution of religiosity. The research identifies the perceptual transformation of truth and the sacred matter, religious identity, religious authority, the concept of chastity, and the consumerization of the religious as the components of religiosity that have evolved under the influence of virtual space. The study concludes that the virtual space is secular by nature.

Keywords: Cyberspace, religion, religiosity, evolution, the sacred, religious identity, religious authority, chastity, consumerization

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Introduction

Rapid and effective development has occurred in both technological possibilities and transformations of individuals and societies resulting from this progress. The changes that began with the industrial revolution have continued to expand throughout the twentieth century, reaching broader dimensions than any other period in human history. With the invention of the internet and its widespread use across all layers of society in the last quarter of the century, this change has taken on another dimension and has now thoroughly transformed the behaviors of individuals as well as their personal and social lives (Haberli 2014, 237). The internet, which is the most important element of cyberspace, was first developed in the United States during the late 1960s by the "Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency" (DARPA) to connect computer systems in different areas. It was later adopted by civilian agencies and organizations, and today it is an integral part of our daily lives, serving a multitude of purposes beyond being a tool for mass media. This situation has convinced many social science scholars to focus on the internet as a serious subject for study. As a result, many events and social phenomena are being discussed in relation to the internet. Today, the internet plays a significant role in the realm of religions and religious developments, extending far beyond its function as a mass media (Candemir 2019, 159).

The global expansion of the internet, especially after the 1990s, and the online communication opportunities provided by computer networks have led people to connect with the virtual reality environment." Social media, a network that transfers messages created with digital systems, is one example of such virtual environments. Today, due to technological developments, new communication networks have disrupted the order of reality and formed a new daily reality by introducing a reformed shape to society (Timur 2018).

It is interesting to note that human society was first introduced to the concept of virtual space through cinema, rather than the internet. With the initiation of cinema in the 1890s, the virtual world entered human life and became an important center of attention. During that time, people had only weekly access to the virtual world through cinema. However, the expansion of the

influences of virtual space on humanity came during the era of television. From that point on, movies and news were watched every day. With the arrival of television as the second gateway for human societies into the virtual world, the two-hour screen time per week increased to four hours every day. The third era of the virtual space began with the internet age and has further increased the human thirst for using technology and machinery. In addition to the four hours of daily TV viewing on average, people now spend an additional two hours on average surfing the internet every day.

Mobile phones represent the fourth step in communicating with the virtual space, and their introduction has led to a significant increase in screen time compared to the past (Merter 2013, 506-8).

Cyberspace and social media have now found a perfect role in the daily lives of individuals, serving as a means to establish social relations, engage in economic activities, provide entertainment, and facilitate education. They serve various functions depending on people's ever-changing requirements. It is undeniable that individuals, societies, and states are affected by cyberspace and social media, in parallel with the contemporary changes taking place. Today, their influence extends beyond the virtual space and into the physical and social world (Metin and Karakaya 2017, 110). New technological and communication developments have brought about significant changes in human perception of "place" and "time." The expansion of cyberspace into new domains signifies that the world we were once familiar with has been reformed. It is crucial to examine the effects that have blurred the distinctions between physical and nonphysical, natural and fictional, and real and virtual for the human mind and society. Despite being virtual, cyberspace has become a significant part of the world's dominant culture and now plays a decisive role (Geraci 2010, 72).

Undoubtedly, religiosity is one of the areas that has been influenced by the virtual space. It is a well-established fact that cyberspace has created new cultural forms by altering culture and its components in the digital age. In the past, the role of religion, as one of the main components of cultural manifestations that plays an active role in the lives of many people, was often ignored in studies of the social sciences. However, over the past thirty

years, researchers who focus on digital technology and the internet have increasingly paid attention to the interactions between cyberspace, new technologies, society, culture, and religion (Haberli 2019, 309). As religious individuals became more engaged with cyberspace and began to connect with religion through digital means, a two-fold effect emerged: on one hand, religious individuals began to make instrumental use of cyberspace, while on the other hand, the unique structure and nature of the virtual space began to influence religiosity. The main priority is to understand how the religious truth, as a sacred concept, as well as other main religious components such as religious knowledge, religious identity, and religious authority, are influenced by cyberspace. It is also important to examine and measure the extent of behavioral change among religious individuals in the face of the consumer culture that dominates the virtual world.

This research aims to provide answers to the above questions by drawing on the ideas of Heidegger and Baudrillard regarding technology and media.

Relationships among Cyberspace, Religion, and Religiosity

From the most primitive means of communication such as cave paintings and ancient Egyptian sculptures and papyrus, to the printing press, electronic media, and today's virtual and digital communication technologies, almost all have been used as means of transmitting religious thoughts, beliefs, and knowledge to other societies. Therefore, it is evident that before the advent of modern communication facilities, sacred texts and information were transmitted and preserved orally or through books as an important element of written culture. In the digital age, a significant portion of religious literature that was once transmitted through oral or written culture has now been transferred to and distributed via digital and virtual environments. Websites, social media, forums, and cloud storage platforms now contain millions of religious data that is openly accessible to anyone. Furthermore, there are now numerous religious applications available on platforms such as Google Play Store and Apple Store, which offer features such as interpretation and exegesis of sacred texts (e.g., Quran and hadith), translations, self-education apps, and more. These

applications have made it incredibly easy for users to access religious information (Haberli 2019, 309).

The use of the internet by some universities marked the beginning of religions becoming acquainted with it. Chat rooms, forums, and categorized lists provided by some websites formed the first core of religious content on the web. The first religious websites were primarily designed for informational purposes. These websites contained information on subjects such as religion, history, and ethics, and enabled people from around the world to exchange ideas. On these pages, users began to communicate with one another based on their thoughts, views, and religious practices. These interactions were not subject to restriction or control, and as a result, they became popular and soon attracted a huge number of users. These communications and collaborations not only included amateur personal ideas but also became institutionalized and organized, with groups and managers appointed by prominent religious figures taking charge of them (Candemir 2019, 159-60).

Today, the virtual space provides a platform where people can communicate with others more smoothly, free from social concerns and boundaries, and thereby reduce their real-life loneliness (Morahan-Martin and Schumacher 2003, 659). Regardless of religion, language, or race, followers of different religions and schools of thought communicate with one another via social media. The virtual space and social media facilitate boundless communication, allowing users to freely share their beliefs. Various ideologies and schools of thought, from atheism to deism and agnosticism, from religious tolerance to radical religious movements, are present on this virtual space platform. Consequently, the confrontation of different or opposing ideas seems inevitable. In this context, digital religion reconstructs the real society and, as a result, reproduces traditional religion (Gezginç and Işıklı 2018, 115).

Communication scientists and sociologists, particularly sociologists of religion, have defined and categorized the interaction of religion with the virtual space and digital media from various angles. During the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, while interacting with religious content, the term "virtual religion" was frequently used to describe the phenomenon of "cyber

religion" or "virtual religion." This concept refers to a new type of interconnection that demonstrates an encounter between religion and computer technologies, as well as the transmission of people's religious and spiritual life to the virtual world. With the increase of web communications during the 2000s, the concept of "religion online" originated, which indicated the engagement of religions with the internet as a means of communication. The term "online religion" also emerged, revealing the use of the internet and new media as an interactive space by religions. Technological developments related to virtual space, the variety of performance, and the relationship between new media environments and religion have given rise to new definitions and conceptualizations in accordance with the spirit of the age. In recent years, the term "virtual religion" has been used more frequently to describe online religious practices.

The term "virtual religion" or "cyber religion" was coined to describe the phenomenon of the emergence of religion through media, cyberspace, and digital culture. This interpretation not only refers to religious perception that is portrayed and implemented online but also highlights how media and cyberspace shape religious practices (Haberli 2019, 309-10).

In comparison to traditional communication tools, cyberspace provides a fast and interactive network that offers a much broader space for religions and religious individuals. Consequently, religious communities and organizations have gained remarkable abilities to propagate and promote their belief systems and rituals to a wider audience. While cyberspace serves as an efficient medium for invitation and preaching, it can also act as a driving force for change and transformation of religion and religiosity. One example of this is the emergence of new virtual religious rites in religions with over a thousand years of history, which could be considered a significant alteration (Candemir 2019, 159).

In other words, after religious individuals began engaging with cyberspace, a debate arose regarding whether these activities serve the purpose of religion and religiosity or not. The emergence of these concepts and their meanings can be seen as a reflection of this ongoing debate. There are two main perspectives regarding this issue: the first is expressed through the concepts of "online religion" and "the online religious." According to this viewpoint, the virtual

space should be utilized as an opportunity and a means to serve religion and religiosity. The second perspective, based on the concept of "cyber religion," argues that religions which engage with and use the virtual space may be influenced by the unique characteristics of this platform, potentially leading to transformation and a loss of originality in their religiosity. Considering the extensive and multi-dimensional activities of religious individuals in cyberspace, and the resulting increase in religious knowledge, it is clear that the virtual space has a range of instrumental functions and achievements that cannot be ignored. However, despite these undeniable results, it is important to investigate the qualitative impact of the virtual space on religion and religious individuals, and to what extent their engagement with the web has influenced their transformation. This is a vital matter that requires further exploration. It appears that while the virtual space facilitates the activities of religion and religiosity at an outward, superficial, and quantitative level, and serves as a tool for religious individuals, its potentially hegemonic nature can negatively impact the quality of religiosity at deeper levels. Drawing on the perspectives of Martin Heidegger and Jean Baudrillard regarding technology and media, this view will be further explored as one of the main hypotheses of this research paper.

Conceptual Framework

Despite frequent comparisons to and associations with terms such as "internet" or "digital virtual realm," the exact definition of "cyberspace" remains elusive, lacking international consensus. Diverse organizations, including the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the National Security Agency (NSA), and the Russian-American Cyber Security Summit, among others, have put forth their own proposed definitions. The Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms of the Department of Defense defines cyberspace as "a global domain within the information environment, encompassing the interconnected network of information systems infrastructures, including the Internet, telecommunications networks, computer systems, and embedded processors and controllers." Conversely, the Russian-American Cyber Security Summit characterizes cyberspace as "an electronic medium through which information is generated, transmitted,

received, stored, processed, and erased." Consequently, both descriptions underscore that cyberspace is a fusion of internet and telecommunications technologies that facilitate the obtaining, storing, retrieving, and transmitting of information (Mbanaso, 2015, 18). In this context, cyberspace relies on software as well as mental and cultural aspects. It is a conceptual construct where cultural principles take precedence over other elements (Borujerdi Alavi and Sadiq Yazdchi, 2017, 98).

Recognizing the significance of these two concepts becomes imperative in an era where technology and information play a central role in debates. Consequently, it is crucial to explore how these notions influence culture and religion as integral components, as well as the evolving dynamics between humans and truth. Addressing this matter holds substantial importance. Unsurprisingly, when discussing the nature of technology, particularly information technologies, the names of two prominent contemporary thinkers, Martin Heidegger and Jean Baudrillard, naturally come to mind. Heidegger's philosophical examination of technology, with its reductionist unauthentic approach toward the existence of the world, along with Baudrillard's insights on how new information technologies obscure reality and construct simulated images as reality, within the framework of simulation, offer valuable insights into how virtual space impacts religion and religiosity. These perspectives provide opportunities to explore the influence of virtual space on religion and religiosity.

Heidegger's analysis of the nature of technology involves a comparison between the attitudes and thoughts of ancient and modern humans. He argues that in ancient times, human beings engaged with the world through direct and spontaneous experiences, reacting to everything they encountered. This stands in stark contrast to the subjectivist approach of the present era. In today's world, individuals perceive themselves as subjects and study nature through the lens of modern science. However, these scientific experiments often position nature as an object to be observed from an external standpoint, creating a sense of separation between humanity and the natural world. The construction of subjects is a defining feature of modern scientists, who are driven to interpret and mold things according to their perspectives.

Consequently, science has played a role in alienating humans from nature. Heidegger strongly opposed technological determinism, asserting that underlying economic and ideological forces render technology inherently biased and non-neutral. Modern humans find themselves confined within a framework of rational and scientific thinking, which compels them to perceive reality through imposed concepts (Heidegger 1977).

According to Heidegger, modern technology can be described as a process through which humans seek to comprehend their experiences by reducing them to a set of physical laws and mathematical equations. By categorizing these experiences according to various criteria, individuals attempt to make sense of the world based on their personal existence and ultimately aspire to exert control over it. Through this reductionist approach, modern technology aims to establish a framework for understanding and manipulating the entirety of existence. This revelation highlights that the essence of technology does not reside solely in the machines and systems themselves, nor in the individuals utilizing them. Instead, it lies within the state of the human mind, which categorizes and interprets reality in a specific manner, reducing it to mathematical equations. It is this cognitive process of classifying and quantifying the world that truly defines the nature of technology (Heidegger 1977, 26). It is important to recognize that the desire for control over nature, as reflected in this attitude, is merely the initial step towards the domination of humankind (Harvey 1997, 26-27).

Baudrillard also cautions against underestimating the significance of communication tools by reducing them to mere technical instruments. He believed that the misconception of these tools as purely technical devices has led to a neglect of the revolutionary nature of communication itself. By mistakenly interpreting "virtual comprehension" as purely technical in nature, we risk overlooking its true importance and the transformative impact it holds (Baudrillard 2005). In the early stages, modern societies viewed technology as both an economic advancement and a beneficial tool that could enhance human relationships and values. However, over time, technology has shed these characteristics and transformed into a phenomenon that serves the consumer system. It has progressively eroded people's

connections with one another and with reality. Baudrillard refers to this phenomenon as "contemporary alienation," where technology acts as a force that disconnects individuals from the true nature of existence (Baudrillard 2016, 244).

He argues that technology has severed the essential connections between individuals ("man to man") and between individuals and reality ("man to reality"). This state of "contemporary alienation" has led to a profound disconnection from the true nature of existence. As a result, people find themselves increasingly detached from reality (Metin and Karakaya 2017). By erasing the reality, technology assumes a significant role in the dominance of symbols and simulations. The advent of technology has systematically eradicated real images, a process that reached its culmination with the shift from analogue to digital technologies (Baudrillard 2012, 18). The influence of technology on society is the catalyst for significant transformations. People find themselves compelled to utilize various technological tools out of necessity. Technology instills a captivating optimism within individuals, leading them to embrace and rely on these tools. Baudrillard argues that humanity's submission to this virtual world order, brought about by technological processes, can be viewed as a form of enslavement (Baudrillard 2001, 54). In the contemporary world, people's identity and freedom are predominantly shaped by a virtual order. The dynamics of this virtual realm, governed by interconnected networks, exert a significant influence over individuals, resembling a mental diaspora (Baudrillard 2005, 55).

To elucidate his virtual order, Baudrillard introduces several key concepts, namely "simulation," "hyperreality," "implosion of meaning," and "hot and cool events." Simulation entails the replication of reality through symbolic representation. In simulations, realities often appear more authentic than they truly are (Baudrillard 2015, 69). It is an endeavor to portray something unreal as though it were real (Baudrillard 2014, 3). Hyperreality entails the dissolution of boundaries between reality and fiction, resulting in a blurred distinction between the two (Yumrukuz 2016, 88). "Implosion of meaning" refers to a category that engulfs the "contents of knowledge," "relations," and "social matter" that it has generated, leading to the destruction of meaning

and leaving social matter devoid of any meaningful information (Yumrukuz 2016, 89). The concept of the "hot and cool event" also highlights the influence of mass communication tools. These tools transform hot media events into cool events, thereby normalizing them and turning them into a source of entertainment (Yumrukuz 2016, 88).

He also posits the notion of reality's annihilation, emphasizing that it is not an ontological obliteration of reality itself. In its place, "signs" or "symbols" supplant reality. Additionally, certain factors impede the acquisition of knowledge from objects. While Foucault attributes this obstruction to "power," Baudrillard identifies the factor as "forces of production" (Güzel 2015, 68). According to Baudrillard's perspective, the transition to the state of hyperreality in postmodern society occurs through a series of distinct stages. The creation of signs can be understood within four stages. The first stage involves signs, which encompass words and images, developing as a reflection of reality. In the second phase, images begin to embellish, exaggerate, and distort reality. However, there is no complete detachment from reality, and signs continue to function as symbols reflecting aspects of reality. In the third and fourth stages, simulation takes over and a new symbolic society emerges. This society is characterized by the dominance of simulation and imitation, where symbols and signs become detached from their original referents in reality. As a result, human relationships appear to be merely symbolic in nature. In such a society, discussions about epistemological truth or objective reality become increasingly elusive (Güzel 2015, 69).

Social media play key role in this process. In social media, people are displayed with codes. They represent an ideal image of themselves. Social media characters are flawless. Regarding Baudrillard's thoughts, this state of perfection is defined as flawless hyper realities. Contrary to absolute reality which, is incomplete, the hyper realities are perfect in his take on it (Metin and Karakaya 2017). Moreover, in Western societies where simulations surpass reality, the very fabric of society begins to dissolve, giving rise to the emergence of what can be termed as "silent majorities." In this context, the conventional understanding of sociology, which revolves around the masses as a "black hole" where social dynamics are at play, becomes inadequate. This is

because the term "mass" contradicts the essence of "sociological matter" and cannot be regarded as a viable concept (Baudrillard 2015, 12-13).

The interactions between the masses and power structures involve the manipulation of the masses by these influential forces. The masses have become apathetic, a state of indifference carefully cultivated by those in power. As a result, these masses have undergone a process of desocialization, distancing themselves from the concept of collective identity. However, desocialization does not imply a complete loss of control. Public opinion polls, including those conducted through mass media, serve as a means of simulating the thoughts and sentiments of the masses, including the silent majorities. This system of simulation enables the power elements to stay informed about the prevailing opinions among the masses (Baudrillard 2015, 19-26). In this scenario, communication and information tools play a pivotal role in the production of truth (Baudrillard 2015, 65). According to Baudrillard's theory of consumer society, this notion of truth is manufactured to serve the interests of productive powers. Similar to how consumer goods are elevated to a godly status and imbued with sacredness within shopping centers, they are also presented as sacred in nature through social media platforms. Companies' advertisements and virtual shopping communities actively encourage individuals to make purchases. This virtual realm, where even currency exists in digital form, is often referred to as a "simulacrum world" (Metin and Karakaya 2017).

Evolution of the Components of Religiosity in Cyber Space ***Cyberspace and the Loss of Truth as the Sacred Realm***

In accordance with classical philosophy and the teachings of religions, the human relationship with truth extends beyond the realm of rational episteme alone. Given that the contemplation of transcendence is intricately linked to the transcendent realm of existence, the pursuit of truth for humans cannot be achieved solely through discursive and propositional reasoning, which relies on drawing inferences from premises to conclusions. As this phenomenon can occur through various forms of thinking, including intuitive thinking, it necessitates the evolution or spiritual perfection of the human being (Küçükalp 2021, 37). In

modern times, there has been a significant transformation in the nature of intellectual faculties, which were traditionally associated with knowledge and understanding. The intuitive or universal intellect has largely been replaced by a specific or calculative intellect. The universal intellect, which includes intuition, surpasses the particular intellect and enables human beings to perceive truth through thinking. On the other hand, the particular intellect separates truth by adopting a calculative thinking style, treating it as a computational subject. The specific intellect represents the thinking ability that allows one to grasp truth as a known and usable object within the confines of one's mind. This approach often leads individuals to become trapped in their own epistemic world, blurring the distinction between appearance and reality. As a result, this alteration in the concept of intellect, alongside the reduction of the soul to consciousness and intellect to intelligence, has led to a quantitative interpretation of existence, truth, value, and meaning through the lens of computational thinking. This quantitative perspective is reflected in the mind, resulting in the transformation of knowledge into an object for theorizing, as well as the emergence of subjective metaphysics in various forms (Küçükalp 2021, 39).

The identification of being with a reality that arises from an encounter with human epistemic capacities not only strengthens humanity's privileged and exclusive ontological stance but also leads to a narrowing of the scope of existence. Simultaneously, the reduction of the soul to consciousness or intelligence has elevated the humanistic metaphysics formulated through modern scientific and philosophical thought to the level of absolute truth. Additionally, with the rise of technology, there has been an idolization of intelligence and the emergence of a simulated world (Küçükalp 2021, 41).

Through philosophy, science, and modern technology, the world has turned into an object that can be controlled and grasped through computational thinking. Nature, in turn, has been transformed into an immense resource that is expected to fulfill the demands of technology and modern industry for a modern man who has largely neglected the importance of thinking (Heidegger 1966, 50). The quest for human mastery over resources necessitates the articulation of reality, which is

condensed within the human epistemic world, through a process of division and analysis, treating it as atomized parts within a calculative thought process. However, this division has resulted in the loss of the concept of unity. Consequently, knowledge has proliferated into numerous specialized fields, leading to the perpetual production of knowledge focused on distinct topics. As a result, knowledge has been transformed into mere information (Küçükalp 2021, 42).

In this context, the modern individual, immersed in the visual realm of cyberspace, experiences a complete oblivion of the ideas of truth and meaning (Küçükalp 2021, 45), and the proliferation of simulacra, which surpasses truth and reality, serves to obfuscate the act of forgetting the truth (Baudrillard 2015, 12). Put differently, the world portrayed in social media and cyberspace is often depicted as cosmopolitan, but this presentation often generates a multitude of images that lack substance or meaningful content (Baudrillard 1998, 22-23). Consequently, in the realm of virtual space and media, the distinction between the signifier and the signified has become blurred, making it challenging to cultivate a transcendent or realistic understanding of objects. This is a result of the overwhelming proliferation of signs within the virtual space, ultimately causing them to lose their connections to their signified meanings (Ashley 1997, 5).

Virtual Space and Emergence of Techno-Religiosity

The growing prevalence of virtual space has given rise to a distinct form of religion and religiosity known as techno-religion. Techno-religion envisions a realm that transcends human desires and experiences. One particularly intriguing emerging ideology is "dataism," which does not worship gods or humans but instead venerates data itself (Harari 2017, 381). Dataism posits that the universe is comprised of a continuous "data flow," and the worth of each phenomenon or entity is evaluated based on its contribution to the process of data processing. While this concept may initially appear ambitious or even outlandish, it has made an impact within scientific circles (Harari 2017, 383).

According to Harari, as the global data-processing system attains omniscience and omnipotence, being connected to this

system becomes the ultimate source of meaning. People are drawn to engage with the data flow because it grants them a sense of being connected to a superior entity. In traditional religions, every human action was viewed as part of a grand cosmic plan, with God overseeing and controlling every aspect of our lives, including our emotions and thoughts. In the realm of dataism, it is asserted that every word and action we take becomes part of a vast data flow, constantly monitored by algorithms that process our feelings and thoughts. Many individuals find contentment in this arrangement. For the followers of this religion, disconnecting from the data flow implies the risk of losing the very essence and purpose of life (Harari 2017, 403).

Simultaneously, data serves as discrete and objective facts about events, representing the raw material for analysis. Information, on the other hand, is the processed form of data, imbued with meaning and significance, and predates the scientific process. Nevertheless, knowledge and science serve as rational filters for data and information, applied as needed in decision-making, planning, comparison, evaluation, analysis, and production, drawing from personal experiences, perceptions, intuitions, feelings, and values. In essence, knowledge is personal and internal in nature. Information requires processing and reevaluation in light of individual circumstances. Unless knowledge is critically examined for accuracy and applicability, it descends to the level of mere information (Ekinci 2016, 291-92).

The degree of knowledge, enriched by personal experiences, can be elevated when it is internalized, integrated with other knowledge, and remains open to observation and receptive to criticism in the face of contradictions and inadequacies. The concepts of prudence, thinking, and reasoning play vital roles in facilitating the attainment of this level of knowledge. Achieving a genuine understanding of truth through knowledge is made possible by internalizing it and actively applying it to one's life. Knowledge that fails to transform one's way of life remains nothing more than a collection of information (Ekinci 2016, 292-93).

In the absence of the human factor, such as scholars or mystics, who played a pivotal role in the transmission of knowledge in ancient civilizations, particularly in Islamic civilization, the sources and references of information become obscure.

Consequently, religious knowledge that is transferred to the virtual environment is often reduced to the status of mere information. However, in Islam, the connection between knowledge and faith is rooted in the internalization of knowledge and its practical application in daily life. On the contrary, present-day religious perception and practice are fragmented and incomplete, resulting in a weakening of the relationship between religious knowledge and truth in the process of virtualization (Ekinci 2016, 297).

Hence, it can be argued that the information circulated in cyberspace and labeled as religious knowledge lacks epistemic value. In an insecure and unregulated environment, which is inherent to the cyber world, this information is prone to losing its credibility. It acquires characteristics akin to commodities, transforming into a fictional and manipulated representation. The virtual reality created by internet technology constructs a simulated world, detached from actual reality. This digital landscape manifests as a distant, intangible, and imaginary environment, enticing users and enabling manipulation. The ranking of websites based on popularity among search engines and the presentation of personalized alternatives aligned with user search history and preferences exemplify the utilization of cyberspace as a means of manipulation and control (Ekinci 2016, 294).

Cyberspace and Consumerization of Religiosity

The essence of digitization and cyberspace is revealed by the fact that "digital representation" within this realm is essentially a numerical code composed of binary numbers, specifically "0" and "1." A digital representation can be understood as a calculable mathematical expression. The fundamental characteristic of digital representation is its "computability" or calculability. All digital identities, entities, and phenomena can be computed by transforming them into mathematical expressions. Moreover, computability, measurability, and evaluability imply objectivity in the context of digitization and cyberspace (Yurtsever 2021, 23-24).

Currently, leading virtual platforms and applications like Facebook and Google translate various aspects of human life, including actions, interests, emotions, aspirations, and experiences, into binary codes represented by "0s" and "1s."

These codes are then categorized, calculated, and interpreted through computational processes. Digitization encompasses not only material goods but also different facets of human experiences, transforming them into computable codes. This digitization enables the conversion of human behavior into computable data. Consequently, the emergence of "predictable behavioral structures" can be observed, with these structures being marketed based on calculations. Google, Facebook, and similar platforms generate and sell predictions about how people will behave in specific aspects of their daily lives, be it today, tomorrow, six months from now, or even in the following year, within the realm of cyberspace. In this "future market," human behavior is treated as a commodity, and forecasts regarding the future behaviors of specific groups with distinct characteristics are traded for monetary value. The algorithms of digital platforms not only predict users' future behavior but also shape and influence them, ultimately leading to an increase in the market value of these predictable structures (Yurtsever 2021, 27).

The process of identifying, forecasting, guiding, and commodifying desires, behaviors, and thoughts within virtual space extends to matters related to religion and religiosity. This includes the creation of secular and modern sacred entities, which are influenced by the reciprocal effects of religion and modernity, ultimately reshaping them within popular culture. There exists an interactive process where these two forces interact and influence each other. The culture of capitalist consumption and spiritual inclinations have become intertwined and well adapted to contemporary means of communication and global consumption. Within this realm, in addition to spiritual fulfillment, a new logic of consumption emerges, along with a mechanism for commodifying sacred entities. This phenomenon represents a new paradigm, as it involves the adaptation of the sacred to modern secular processes (Arslan 2016, 218).

Alongside the commodification of sacred entities and the commercialization of religion as a product within cyberspace, there are specific areas in the virtual realm that are designated for managing opportunities to display advertisements and generate revenue. With the advent of new media, which empower individuals to become content creators, various professionals

engage in these activities. This includes not only temporary content providers, consultants, producers, and hosts (such as anchors or presenters) who work in the media industry, especially during the month of Ramadan in the Islamic world, but also religious preachers and academics who frequently participate as guests in talk shows and similar programs within cyberspace. The presence of academics and religious scholars in the media, the efforts to disseminate knowledge through media platforms in cyberspace, and the commercialization of information hold significance from both legal and ethical perspectives (Aydeniz 2016, 309).

Cyberspace and Evolution of Religious Identity

Religious identity is shaped through the adoption of specific beliefs, values, and lifestyles, as well as through emotional connections formed during interactions with others. In real-life settings, believers experience a sense of social cohesion that aligns with their chosen path, and they engage in communication with outsiders within certain necessary boundaries. However, this dynamic changes in the virtual space, as cyberspace is structured according to its own distinct set of values. Even if one's intentions and motivations are pure and transcendent, the religious identity within the virtual realm, if taken seriously, can become susceptible to becoming lost amidst the virtual world's values. The prevailing humanist and consumerist culture in virtual space, often disguised as promoting dialogue, seeks to transform and neutralize religious identity and lifestyle by imposing its "pluralistic value judgments." Dialogue itself is not inherently problematic; however, the issue arises because cyberspace is recognized as a non-neutral platform.

Today, religious communities exhibit diverse attitudes and identities within the cyber world while actively engaging in the construction of a lifestyle that aligns with the advancements of modern technology. Religious communities are undergoing a transformation in the digital world, adopting unique approaches to redefine their presence. Social and religious identity has been transformed in the online space, consequently reshaping the realms of religion and spirituality. The process of rationalization, virtualization, and digitization has unveiled a novel society and way of life. The advent of digitalization has fundamentally altered

our understanding of values, the content of religion, and the perspectives of the faithful. While the presence of religious data has expanded in virtual spaces, it inevitably brings about transformations in traditional forms of religion. Particularly within societies that have embraced technology as consumers, these changes can have far-reaching and potentially disruptive consequences. Indeed, the intertwining of religion and the cyberworld poses a threat not only to religious identity but also to the inherent risk of virtualization, potentially leading to the loss of its original essence (Dağ 2021, 68-69).

The virtualization of religion within the realms of time and space carries significant consequences. These include the transformation of religion from a practical arena to a theoretical entity, the diminishing of religion to the level of media programs and applications, and the superficialization of the sacred dimension and religious truths.

Religion has distanced itself from being a historical, sacred, and profoundly human activity, resulting in the gradual disappearance of these defining characteristics. The virtual space lacks the presence of faith, tradition, theology, and the transcendent spiritual essence. Given that one of the vital dimensions of religion is to foster and fortify connections with the sacred realm, virtual space and media have not been particularly successful in fulfilling this role (Ekinçi 2016, 295). The rise of digital or virtual religion has resulted in a diminished influence of traditional religious organizations and figures. The emergence of a new form of digital religion, built upon images and symbols within cyberspace, has led to reduced mental and spiritual impacts within the digital realm due to the process of digitalization. Users within social media, one of the arenas of digital religion, strive to emphasize their religious identity as part of their digital presence and online persona (Eker 2020).

Virtual Space and the Religious Authority

True religiosity is a multifaceted process encompassing thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. It necessitates traversing through challenges, fostering curiosity, and cultivating focused attention. God says in the holy Quran: "And follow not that of which you have not the knowledge; surely the hearing and the sight and the

heart, all of these, shall be questioned about that" (Quran 17:36); "And We did not send before you any but men to whom We sent revelation — so ask the followers of the Reminder if you do not know" (Quran 16:43); and "Yet it is not for the faithful to go forth en masse. But why should not there a group from each of their sections go forth to become learned in religion, and to warn their people when they return to them, so that they may beware?" (Quran 9:122). The holy verses mentioned above illuminate the universal nature of this path, which leads to the attainment of accurate beliefs, applicable across all times and contexts. The establishment of this authority among people initially originated from the "Islamic sciences/scholars" and subsequently by "Sufis, masters, and mentors" throughout the history of Islam. This approach stands in stark contrast to primitive religions and religiosity, which rely on spontaneous speech, dogmatism, imitation, and superstitions (Güler 2016, 230). In contemporary times, the authority of religious figures such as scholars and theologians has been somewhat marginalized, giving way to transformed relationships and the emergence of virtual spaces. In today's world, the internet serves as the foundation for the coexistence of religious data and the faithful (Dağ 2021, 54).

Within this new digital realm, a religion that fails to effectively promote itself and gain recognition will gradually lose its significance among individuals who seek meaning and spiritual fulfillment in the virtual/digital world. The emergence of pragmatic, functional, and individualistic forms of religion often results in the marginalization or negation of traditional religious practices. As daily life increasingly adopts an economic and virtual nature, all aspects, including religious authority, undergo a transformation into data within the cyberspace.

Furthermore, even in moments where individuals seek seclusion and are supposed to delve into their inner worlds, privacy often becomes compromised. For instance, individuals may find themselves sharing posts of the "Kaaba" and the city of "Medina" solely to garner more "likes" on social media platforms. One of the most widespread misconceptions among users is the belief that they can find answers to any questions simply by remaining online in the cyberspace. Debate, once a tradition with a dialectical nature in the history of Islam, is now often perceived as a determining factor for

rating or evaluating individuals in the eyes of the people. The debates that were once conducted with kindness, rationality, and tolerance have now given way to intolerant and aggressive controversies. The only thing that will matter in this vicious shift is the platform and audience. Within the cyberspace, religious activists (clergies and religious preachers) and their audiences form distinct group structures that revolve around various content (Dağ 2021, 69). The classification of people's concerns and interests exerts a transformative influence on the essence of religious knowledge, resulting in changes to religious authority. In other words, scientific advancements and technology contribute to the erosion of traditional authorities and the sources of social legitimacy (Ekinci 2016, 295).

Cyberspace, Self-Exhibition, and Evolution of the Concept of Chastity

Descartes' famous quote "I think therefore I am" has found a new iteration in cyberspace as "I appear therefore I am." Consequently, for many individuals, the desire for visibility and self-promotion becomes a driving force that they strive to fulfill, requiring dedicated effort. As a result, the concept of chastity has undergone changes, particularly among religious individuals, due to the prevalent inclination towards self-exhibition and the individual's desire for increased visibility, since the notions of modesty and chastity can be perceived as constraints on the freedom of self-exhibition. By promising unlimited freedom, the cyberspace instills in individuals the notion of transparently witnessing private affairs (Aycan 2019, 19).

Indeed, an important question that arises is why people are inclined to showcase themselves in cyberspace and what detrimental effects it has on modesty and chastity, particularly among the faithful. The misconception that dignity and social status, which are traditionally achieved through responsibilities and real-life efforts, can be attained through visibility and self-promotion in cyberspace can be approached from two perspectives. Firstly, it is observed that socially isolated individuals often perceive cyberspace as their primary domain of existence. Secondly, by examining the aesthetic values prevalent in virtual spaces and the consumer culture that dominates this realm, a deeper

understanding of this phenomenon can be gained. Driven by the desire to capture others people's attention, these observations and assessments intensify individuals' yearning for greater presence and self-exhibition in the cyber realm, leading them to disregard religious and social norms regarding their appearance. Consequently, the conventional notion of religious chastity undergoes a transformation, giving rise to a new concept.

Matchmaking sites are one of the domains where the concept of chastity loses its significance due to the emphasis on self-display. The so-called Islamic matchmaking websites, in reality, commodify and undermine values, deviating from their professed purpose, and instead operate within a marketer-customer dynamic. These websites not only exploit Islam as a marketing tool but also, at times, engage in fraudulent practices. Furthermore, by incorporating certain images, they contribute to transforming themselves into centers of sensual attraction (Büyükaslan 2016, 209).

Conclusion

The technology we have today has brought convenience to human life since its inception, and as a result, it has facilitated the reproduction of humans for the sake of data convenience. Today, human beings are increasingly living a digital life. There is a growing argument that in the future, whether it be near or distant, this way of life may give rise to a new form known as the "post-human" within the realm of "transhumanism." The ability to anticipate the characteristics, beliefs, behaviors, and inclinations of future generations, particularly in relation to religious beliefs, is intertwined with studies on virtual religion. The phenomenon of "techno-religiosity" emerges from the interaction between religion, the faithful, and the cyberspace. In the realm of techno-religion, the traditional mosque has been replaced by the monitor screen, and physical prayer has been substituted with keyboard interactions. This transition gives rise to a form of spirituality known as online religion, which is fostered and disseminated through various online communication platforms such as email, WhatsApp, sermons

in the form of podcasts on YouTube, forums, and infographics. In this context, virtual space and the internet are not only seen as mere tools or technological entities but are also recognized as social connectors and dynamic arenas where culture is both created and negotiated.

Virtual space, on one hand, offers opportunities for the expression of diverse religions and thoughts, fostering a pluralistic environment. However, on the other hand, it also serves as the medium through which these expressions can be co-opted and transformed within the dominant influence of postmodern techno-capitalism. In essence, the virtual space encompasses a wide range of religious and secular ideas at a superficial level, creating an illusion of pluralism. However, its underlying objective is the fundamental transformation of the entire landscape, aligning with postmodern techno-capitalist ideologies and values.

As the faithful's engagement with the internet and their utilization of virtual space as the primary domain for religious activities grow, several interconnected phenomena emerge. These include the evolution of the perception of truth as sacred, the consumerism of religiosity, the rise of dataism, the transformation of religious authority and identity, and the redefinition of the concept of chastity. These developments can be seen as part of a larger trajectory.

The transformation of religiosity is a consequence of the secular nature of cyberspace, as it influences the way religious practices are conducted and the perception of spirituality. The inclination to shape technology in accordance with humanistic goals and personal interests, along with the tendency to perceive existence through specific patterns and an egotistical lens, are the fundamental components of the thought that has given rise to technology. Hence, the ideology underlying virtual space, as an integral part of digital technology, possesses a dominant and power-seeking nature, serving the interests of the productive forces. Furthermore, the simulated nature of virtual space and the prevalence of simulacra contribute to the devaluation of truth and the sacred, reducing them to mere quantities and virtual

appearances. Therefore, due to its secular and materialistic nature, virtual space lacks the capacity to uphold the weight of truth and the sacred, as they necessitate distinct epistemic and ontological means and processes. It is essential to acknowledge that this incapacity is not considered a neutral deficiency. Virtual space attempts to tailor the truth and the sacred according to its own capabilities, resulting in their devaluation to a superficial and distorted state. As a result of the human inclination and constant pursuit of novelty and transient innovations, individuals become alienated from the truth and the sacred, which are characterized as stable and profound concepts.

Given the multi-layered and intricate nature of cyberspace, it becomes crucial for Muslims, who may struggle to differentiate between knowledge on different levels, faith, and morals, to develop awareness and media literacy. This is particularly important in grappling with the superficialization of the sacred, religious truth, and the emergence of new epistemologies facilitated by information technologies. It is necessary to understand these new epistemic hegemonies that often prioritize knowledge and values based on mass approval. Undoubtedly, factors such as the duration, frequency, and quality of internet usage, user intentions, the illusion of reality within cyberspace, and the level of user engagement with the internet and social networks all play a significant role in shaping the extent to which society is influenced.

It is important to acknowledge that religious activities in the virtual environment can lead to a sense of pseudo-satisfaction, which may prevent religious individuals from fulfilling their obligatory or recommended practices and duties in the physical realm. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that virtual activities are complemented by corresponding real-world actions. By establishing a strong connection between the virtual and physical realms, more effective outcomes can be achieved. In essence, individuals with religious concerns should prioritize the real world and society over the virtual space. Moreover, the concept of social theology should be given due importance. Engaging with the real-world society

allows religious individuals to develop a genuine understanding of their religion, apply sacred teachings in practice, and safeguard themselves from the transformative influences of techno-capitalist civilization. In this context, the virtual space can serve as a complementary tool for religiosity and religious practices within society.

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