



BEYOND THE SACRED AND PROFANE – MAN IN CYBERSPACE –

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Since the beginning of humanity, man has oscillated between two ontological spaces: sacred and profane. In all the great religions of the world, man understands his purpose on this earth as a search or passage to an eternity of happiness, a space and a time before which he incur an incurable nostalgia. The telluric weather and the nostalgia of paradise compel man to invoke divinity, building for this meeting sacred spaces. Technological progress and new philosophical currents have tried to cure man of this nostalgia for ever, perfecting the death of divinity. In an unprecedented creative momentum, the man got up truffles, daring to believe that he can become a creator himself. Cyberspace is the most spectacular revolution of human intelligence, in full swing. What is man related to his creation?

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"Paradise is a deep and universal human sigh, a reminder of a lost state, or an aspiration to a future state", Nichifor Crainic said in *Nostalgia of Paradise*¹. The idea of the constant search, of man's anxiety since the dawn of humanity is in all the works of art that have resisted the erosion of time. The Christian metaphor of exile as a form of human existence was an artistic key meant to give voice to this search. Vintila Horia speaks of man's life on earth as a constant search for the road to home, to the paradise from which he was banished in primordial times because of disobedience².

Christianity offers one of the most powerful expressions of this search, joining the steps of man who seeks a lost world with those of a creative deity that sets itself in search of his creation. But, as Nichifor Crainic points out, "the idea of paradise is not specifically Christian, but is an idea that belongs to the entire human race".

We do not intend in this paper to make an apology of the search. We ourselves embark on an adventure of research and the search for the purpose of contemporary man, wanting to understand to what extent the technological inventions of the human mind, which develop at an accelerated pace, represent a modern expression, a result of this search for the lost and happy world, or, on the contrary, a renunciation to the search and, rather, a form of creative vanity of man who, tired of effort, thinks himself capable of building his own

paradise. It is a new world, made by the mind and hand of man, a matrix that expands rapidly and covers the entire Earth, connecting people through devices and electromagnetic pulses in a virtual network, diluting geographic distances, giving new meanings and new human feelings.

What is virtual space or cyberspace? Is it an alternative life, in which man can escape to meet his needs for knowledge, information, to feel happiness, to manifest his feelings of hatred or revenge? Or is it a mysterious and appealing alternative to the ordinary life of modern man? In what capacity does man step into the new world he alone has made? What is the identity of man in virtual space? Is he master of this space? Is the virtual world a happy world, a world of freedom? Are there rules that govern this new world? What are the limits of this world and how fragile is it? *Homo numericus*, the man of virtual space, is he also *homo religiosus*? Does virtual space give man the answer to all his questions and anxieties? Is this the world where man's search ends? Does the nostalgia of paradise still concern the human mind once it enters virtual space? Is eternity possible in the virtual world? What are the values of the virtual world? Are there violence and war in virtual space? Is the virtual creation perfect or is it just a copy of its creator? What are the relationships between people in the virtual world? Can the famous imperative of the French Revolution "freedom, equality, fraternity" be exported to the virtual world? These are only a few questions from a very wide range of challenges that open up to our

* *Romanian Patriarchy*

research and to which we will try to find answers during this challenging endeavor.

A direction of research was inspired by one of the titans of the history of religions, Mircea Eliade, who talks about two existential sites assumed by man throughout his history: the sacred and the profane³. The man of the beginnings is a *homo religiosus*, for whom "space is not homogeneous, but shows ruptures and cracks: "Do not come near here, the Lord says to Moses, but take your shoes off your feet, as the place which you step on is holy ground" (Exit, 3,5)⁴.

This religious experience of non-homogeneous space is classified as a rupture in space, which is actually the foundation of the World. It is the manifestation of the sacred that establishes the world ontologically, says Mircea Eliade. It gives the religious man a fixed point, an orientation in chaos. On the opposite pole is the profane man, for whom space is homogeneous, neutral, relative. For the profane man, there is no fixed point, in fact no World, but only "an amorphous mass made up of an infinite number of more or less neutral places, in which man moves, driven by the obligations of an existence integrated into an industrial society"⁵.

Mircea Eliade offers a natural explanation of how the religious man lives the space: the entrance to a church located on a busy street in a metropolis. The opening of the entrance door to the church represents the rupture between the homogeneous, profane and sacred space. The threshold of the door observes the distance between the two modes of existence and, at the same time, the paradoxical place of communication between them, the point in which the transition from the profane to the sacred world is made. The church or temple represents the gateway to another world, "a sacred space that emerges from the cosmic environment", where man communicates with the divinity⁶. The religious man's desire to live in the sacred is, in fact, the expression of that nostalgia of paradise that I mentioned in the beginning. The religious man is looking for ways to make it possible to meet the divinity. Temples or churches are considered in the great oriental civilizations copies of a heavenly archetype⁷. These places are holy, the religious man giving them the attribute of the house of divinity.

On the other hand, says Mircea Eliade, the profane, modern man, feels somewhat embarrassed in the face of certain forms of manifestation of the

sacred⁸. For this, it is hard to believe that the sacred can manifest itself inside buildings (temples or churches) or through objects (icons). The paradox is that the profane man, embarrassed, confused or outraged by the possibility of manifesting the sacred, interiorizes, without being fully conscious, traces of a sacred existence. The memory of the father's house, of the first love, the unrestrained desire to visit certain places can be interpreted in the man who declares himself profane as ruptures of the linear experience and the mental or spiritual fixation of reference points meant to put in order, give meaning or to value existence.

Eliade believes that "profane existence is never encountered in a pure state. Whatever the degree of desecration of the World which he has reached, the man who has chosen a profane life fails to completely abolish religious behavior. Even the most desecrated existence still preserves the traces of a religious value of the world"⁹.

Petre Țuțea is even more emphatic in affirming man's need for sacred space even when he declares the death of divinity. The present man "is the descendant of the Renaissance man, whose divinity was «an event», from whose muteness he wants to bring out laws and benefits"¹⁰.

Revival and Enlightenment were moments in the history of *homo religiosus*. These new currents declaratively elevated man to the level of divinity and tried to eliminate the idea of divinity from history. From a Christian perspective, it is the second time man has fallen. Non-religion or the declaration of "the death of God" (Friederich Nietzsche) equates to "a new fall of man": the religious man seems to have lost his ability to consciously live religion, to understand it and to assume it"¹¹.

However, both the historian (Mircea Eliade) and the philosopher (Petre Tutea) disavow this revolt of modern man. There are two similar visions that see man's inability to live in a completely desecrated space, to try to suffocate the "nostalgia of paradise": "it is the feeling that we are of this world and yet we do not belong to it; that the world in our spirit is not identical to the world around us, that we are in the midst of it as left out of a high order of existence, which is denied to us; (...) everything that in our being rhymes in mysterious ways with eternity pushes us to overcome the current way of existence and to conquer a superior and perfect way, conceived in antinomy with the one now and



here. The nostalgia of paradise is the feeling of our existential antinomy, of facts free in spirit, but contradicted by the limits that seem fatal to us; of deeds torn apart by torment, but which conceive a heavenly silence; deeds intended for death, but which we ponder immortality on; of unfortunate deeds, but which burn from the thirst of absolute happiness"¹².

Petre Tutea sees man's thirst to build new divinities or sacred pseudo-spaces. Mircea Eliade finds religiosity in the thickets of the human unconscious, although modern man can strongly believe that he has managed to quench the thirst for the sacred. "After the first fall, man's religiosity collapsed at the level of the broken consciousness; (...) though spiritually blinded, man's ancestor, the primordial man, Adam, had kept enough wisdom to find God's traces in the world. After the second fall of modern man, religiosity collapsed even further down into the depths of the unconscious, and was «forgotten»"¹³. This is how Eliade concludes his work "The Sacred and the Profane", launching the challenge for finding a new possibility or dimension in which man's religiosity will come to light again.

We consider, as Eliade alluded to, that in the face of modern man a new challenge opens: "to what extent a radically secularized existence, without God and without gods, can be the starting point for a new kind of religion... to what extent can the profane become sacred in itself?"¹⁴

The 20th century, the century these two great intellectuals above-quoted belong to, experienced the most terrible confrontations between people, true clashes for an illusory supremacy, springing perhaps even from that demonic thirst to master, a residue of unconscious religiosity. The world was torn in two, the geographical space was divided between West and East and for a century mankind created and experienced technologies and weapons of mass destruction, which sowed death everywhere. After two world conflagrations followed a Cold War, which ended declaratively with the collapse of one of the planet's two great superpowers, the USSR. How was that possible? It is a painful question, the answer of which can be sought precisely in man's revolt against divinity. When man declared the death of divinity, man freed himself from any moral constraint. The shadows of the unconscious where religiosity was banished gave birth to monsters of violence. Man's

intelligence was put in the service of war, in a frenetic start to assert a new man, the messenger of a new era, in which everything is allowed. The Revival and Enlightenment had already been banned divinity from the West. Sacred spaces, cathedrals and temples had either been destroyed or turned into museums. The desecration and undoing of the world, begun in the West, continued frantically in the East throughout the 20th century. The Bolshevik Revolution and Communism set out in search of the refugee-divinity, tearing apart sacred places and persecuting worshipers.

Paradoxically, in the heat of this century of unseen violence in the history of humanity, a premonition was born whose fatherhood remains doubtful today. Attributed to Andre Malraux, the famous foretelling – "The 21st century will be religious or it won't be at all" has generated numerous debates that still continue today. Beyond any debate, it fits very well into the spirit of the beginning of the 21st century, when man seeks new definitions of identity, in a fragmented space, like the shards of a mirror in which, depending on the angle from which you look, you can discover new realities. The profane space knows new valences, the truth multiplies into truths, the words borrow meanings according to the issuer and, above all, man finds himself in the face of a new challenge: a new world of technology, springing from human intelligence, refined and shaped by experiences of thousands of years.

The specialized dictionaries mention, in defining the notion of cyberspace, the American-Canadian author of science fiction writings William Gibson who, in two works written in the '80s (*Burning Chrome* and *Neuromancer*) used the term to designate a virtual reality generated by a computer in the form of a matrix¹⁵. Later, the author disavowed the term, deeming it meaningless. Yet the concept has remained and today it refers to the virtual world created by the computer, an electronic environment used to create a global network of computers to facilitate online communication. Cyberspace provides a virtual interactive environment for a large number of participants. Cyberspace is used to share information, to interact, to exchange ideas, to play games, to discuss and create forums, to lead businesses and to create media and many other activities. In a broad sense, cyberspace is an environment for social interaction.



A few decades earlier, Marshal McLuhan, in the "Gutenberg Galaxy", in 1962, anticipated by the phrase "global village" the emergence of a new form of human interaction, through the mass media.

Surprisingly, the technological advance of mankind over the past decades is unprecedented in the history of humanity. Despite a slow evolution, in which it took man centuries to learn to manufacture tools, to work the earth, to manufacture means of transport, to invent electricity, a rhythm of innovation and invention has passed in all spheres of human activity. The citizens of the "global village", connected at first by the news circulating across the globe via radio, then television, soon became connected to a computer network capable of interacting with people at great distances. Computers and telephone lines have become the tools that have helped build a virtual space¹⁶ – a reality that researchers have seen since the 1990s.

Shortly after its invention, the computer became a main tool of the media. Although originally intended for office activity, the computer was connected to a network with other computers, allowing the exchange of data and the realization of large networks. Connecting several networks allowed the birth of the Internet, comparable to a spider web (web), a global computer network that connects all networks accessible to the public. Accessing search engines allows to find, starting from a simple word, a wide range of information existing on various sites.

There was an enthusiasm of the beginning. A new millennium opened up to mankind in 2000. "The Internet has just come out of the way", says Edward Snowden¹⁷, "and (...) offered a more authentic and complete embodiment of American ideals... A place where all men are equal? Checked. A place dedicated to life, freedom and the pursuit of happiness? Checked, checked, checked". It was a revolution in which all people were invited to participate, each able to take part by developing computer skills. Snowden remembers the enthusiasm with which everyone participated in "the establishment of a new society, based not on the place of birth or education received at home or on the popularity acquired at school, but on our technological knowledge and skills"¹⁸. We find this enthusiasm in "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace", written by John Perry Barlow:

"We create a world in which absolutely all people can enter, without the privileges conferred by race, economic power, military strength or social status. We create a world in which every man can express his own beliefs wherever he wants, no matter how out of the ordinary they may be, without fear that he will be constrained to shut up or obey the rules of society"¹⁹.

A world where all men are equal, where there are no rules, where anyone can say anything. The promise of happiness so close, a space where the impossible in the real world becomes possible, a place where hopes and desires come true. In other words, we are witnessing the birth of a new utopia, to which we are all invited to contribute. A new universe in motion, different from yesterday's and clearly different from tomorrow's, a permanent metamorphosis of man.

A creative act of the whole world, a new world as a refuge from the lack of fulfillment and sufferings of the real world? A creator of a new world who has the freedom to dispose of his creation?

Duke University offers religion courses where the question being debated is whether cyberspace, altering the known idea of humanity, has not turned into a religion of the new millennium²⁰. The Internet explores the abyss of the human mind, the depths of consciousness, the darkness of the unconscious. In other words, the Internet can bring to light those hidden experiences that Mircea Eliade said represented the religiosity suffocated by the desecration of the world. Can virtual space be fertile ground for reassertion of religiosity? Certainly, various religious communities have turned to the Internet to promote their precepts and dogmas, to coagulate followers, to catechize and to attract new members.

The manifestation of religious behavior in the virtual environment is a subject of great topicality and will be a subject of extensive research, since it has been debated in many specialized studies. One of these (Asep Muhamad Iqbal, *When Religion meets the Internet*²¹) aims to analyze the manifestation of the religious phenomenon in the virtual space, in the context of secularization of the real world. The study identified a paradox: although the Renaissance and the Enlightenment banished religion from the public sphere, and the philosophers who followed prophesied the death of the divinity, the birth of virtual space immediately generated a regeneration



of the religious strand. Numerous religious-themed sites have appeared.

The great religions of the world have created their own virtual spaces in the vast cyberspace, where symbols, dogmas, priests are found, services are held, messages are transmitted, pilgrimages are organized. The study differentiates between *online religion*, through which anyone can search for information about a particular religion or religious practice, respectively *religion online*, in which the Internet becomes an environment for practicing religion or showing religiosity.

The excitement of the beginning of the road in receiving the benefits of cyberspace is complemented on the other hand by the skepticism of many researchers, who have analyzed the virtual world from multiple angles. One of the most relevant critical analyses is represented by Jean-Claude Larchet's work, *Captives in the Internet*²². The author identifies the minuses of virtual space, which he considers a true copy of the real space, with dangers that threaten the mental and spiritual health of man: it creates addiction, represents a place of crime, destroys interpersonal relationships, offers a false sense of freedom, diminishes intellectual abilities, alters the normal functioning of the brain, incites violence, allows manipulation and, finally, the enslavement of man. Perhaps the most serious danger is that of dehumanization, the erasure of the boundary between good and evil. In a word, the author identifies a third fall of man, harder than the ones before, since it can kill the religiosity of man and bring the destruction of the human, a phenomenon already announced as post-humanism, in which the world created by man comes to rule and enslave him.

It is important to emphasize the importance that sociologists attach to virtual space. Cyberspace is a unique ontological environment in which a new form of being a society develops: cybersociety. It is about human interactions with a certain affective load, with a horizon of expectations and with a relative continuity. The Internet being accessed by a certain number of users leads to a new form of social organization – this is a direction of in-depth research made by Bogdan Nadolu in *Sociology of virtual spaces*²³.

From a sociological perspective, one of the most serious errors of virtual space is generated by pseudo-identities built by people who develop

interactions in which no one can be sure of the identity of the other. The sociologist draws attention to the fact that "virtual relationship between often utopian roles, assumed and played on its own initiative, in parallel with the permanence of uncertainties on others is, after all, a form of degradation of the human".

Nadolu identifies some features of virtual space²⁴:

- The virtual social space exists and manifests itself only within computer networks which thus become a vital support, similar to that offered by the natural environment for the real social space;

- The support provided by the information technology is created by man and, above all, is under the exclusive and effective control of man;

- Due to the support provided by information technology, the virtual social space is eminently dependent on the actual reality, the evolution of society, the economic structure, the cultural profile and scientific progress. Virtual society is not an independent alternative to the actual one, but merely a way of manifesting it;

- The cancellation of the geographical impediment in human interactions leads to an increase at least quantitatively, but dependence on access to computer technology structures the virtual social space on the basis of individual available resources (financial, technical, material, cognitive, etc.);

- Social actors involved in virtual interactions are engaged in individual-computer-network-computer-individual relationships, with the possibility of being able to define their own identity, but without being able to control or be controlled by others.

Cyberspace research is just at its beginnings. Moreover, including this virtual space is evaluated as being in the first phase of existence. We can talk about a precocious creature, who, like any creation, tends to imitate its creator. It is possible that, in the near future, sooner than we might anticipate it, we may also experience the Christian drama of a God banished from His own creation, isolated, haunted throughout all the corners of the world that He himself has invented. Or, by peeling off the darkness of the unconscious, to release true religiosity that will make its way into the virtual space and render it sacred, or transform it into a real tool of communication and communion between people, a real compensatory remedy to the feeling of nostalgia after a lost paradise.



NOTES:

1 Nichifor Crainic, *Nostalgia paradisului*, Edition with an introductory studio by Dumitru Staniloaie, Babel Publishing House, Bacău, 2012, p. 262.

2 Horia, Vintila, *Dumnezeu s-a născut în exil. Jurnalul lui Ovidiu la Tomis*, French translation by Ileana Cantuniari, Vremea Publishing House, Bucharest, 2016

3 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, translation by Brândușa Prelipceanu, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1995, p. 16.

4 *Ibidem*, p. 21.

5 *Ibidem*, p. 22.

6 *Ibidem*, pp. 26-27.

7 *Ibidem*, p. 54.

8 *Ibidem*, p. 13.

9 *Ibidem*, p. 23.

10 Petre Țuțea, *Omul. Tratat de antropologie creștină. Problemele sau cartea întrebărilor*, Philosophia Perennis Collections, Timpul Publishing House, 1992, p. 180.

11 Mircea Eliade, *op.cit.*, pp. 185-186.

12 Nichifor Crainic, *op.cit.*, p. 263.

13 Mircea Eliade, *op.cit.*, p. 186.

14 *Ibidem*, p. 8.

15 <https://www.techopedia.com/definition/2493/cyberspace>, accessed on 29.02.2020.

16 Michael, Benedikt, *Cyberspace: First Steps*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1991, apud Bogdan Nadolu, *Sociology of mass communication*, Edition Excelsior Art, Timișoara, 2007, p. 153.

17 Edward Snowden, *Permanent File*, Nemira Publishing House, Bucharest, 2019, pp. 186-187.

18 *Ibidem*.

19 *Ibidem*, pp. 187-188. More about *The Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace* (Davos, 1996), <https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence>, accessed on 29.02.2020.

20 <https://religiousstudies.duke.edu/courses/religion-cyberspace>, accessed on 29.02.2020.

21 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332274714_When_Religion_Meets_The_Internet_Cyber-Religion_and_the_Secularization_Thesis, accessed on 29.02.2020.

22 Jean-Claude Larchet, *Captives in the Internet*, in Romanian by Marinela Bojin, Sofia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2018.

23 Bogdan Nadolu, *Sociology of virtual spaces*, Edition Eurostampa, Timișoara, 2004, p. 155.

24 *Ibidem*, p. 144.

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