

On BlackBerry and Beads: Religion in the Matrix of Information Media

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Abstract

This paper examines the ways in which the demise of the “representational cultures” of religious civilisations has left a vacuum of meaning. This vacuum has opened a battleground between the “religion” of mediatised globalisation on one side, and the hardened and absolutised identities of “performative cultures” on the other side. In such a context, multiculturalism has ceased to be an integrated ideal and reality under the informing principles of traditional metaphysics, to give rise to a clash, or a schizophrenia, between globalised individualism, spread by media and digital culture, and communitarian claims to identity, whose only alternatives are self-destructive marginalisation or flattening and desacralising mediatisation. The paper argues that only an inner return to the meaning and objectives of traditional, representational cultures could free one from the snares of the alienating network of globalisation.

Keywords: Religion, media, Islam, Christianity, globalism, multiculturalism, individualism, spirituality, tradition.

The starting point of these reflections is an image familiar to anyone who has either lived or simply travelled in the Gulf region: it is that of young Arabs dressed in their traditional white *tawb* strolling nonchalantly in a commercial mall of Dubai or Abu Dhabi. In their hands, they hold two objects, one could even say two accessories that are part and parcel of their cultural identity: on the one hand, the *subḥa*, or *tasbīḥ*, these beads that have evolved from a religious means of remembering God—which they still are in many other contexts—to worrying beads intended to release tension, or to mechanically occupy idleness; on the other hand, the BlackBerry phone, through which immediate contact is established with the world close and far, through the unlimited, globalised, virtual reality of information and representation. Of these two objects only the second is in such social setting a living reality, the first being nothing but a vestige having relinquished its religious function, or having been converted to the status of an ornamental form without substance.

Representation as reality

I would like to suggest that these two accessories are symbolic markers of two worlds of representation and connection. The beads’ function was to connect the individual inwardly to the source of his or her being, and all beings. In a traditional context, it was—and still is—fundamentally a bodily reminder of reality *as it is*, from within a worldly ambience of forgetfulness and distraction. The beads are, in this sense, the outward sign of an inner, invisible, and transcendent reality that gives meaning to the human condition: they are an immediate connector to this reality. The BlackBerry, on the other hand, is also a connector to reality, but a reality that is not defined by transcendent meaning, but only by its limitless

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and instantaneous accessibility, and its status of bare representation. The pervasiveness of the BlackBerry reflects a regime that has gone beyond what Jean Baudrillard called “dissimulation”, which “masks the absence of a profound reality”, into the domain of “simulation”, wherein the sign “has no relation to any reality whatsoever” and “is its own pure simulacrum.”¹ Baudrillard enumerates four stages in the odyssey of dissimulation and simulation. The first is “sacramental” in the sense that it dissimulates, but also mysteriously evokes, a hidden reality. It pertains to the order of traditional metaphysics and theology. It is what could be referred to as the order of the symbolic, in the sense in which anthropologists like Mircea Eliade and Gilbert Durand have understood it as the “epiphany of a mystery” (Durand). The second refers to a subversion or inversion that evokes the diabolic disruption of meaning. Here, reality is present but it is misrepresented and manipulated with a view to its negation. “I am the Spirit that always denies”, as claimed by Mephistopheles in Goethe’s *Faust*.² The third degree is that of “sorcery,” that of the domain of appearances, when the form is practiced as a means to hide the absence of any reality. This is, in a sense, within the religious domain, the triumph of “Pharisaism” as an absolutisation of form *qua* form as a substitute to reality. The final degree is a complete eviction of reality which means that appearance *is* reality, the simulacrum. There is no meaning to what is “represented” except what is represented itself as pure representation, not in the symbolist sense of a re-presentation of what cannot be “presented”, but in a virtual simulation that has broken any signifying connection to any reality “in itself” or “beyond representation.”³ Needless to say, humans still can, and do, give meaning to whatever it is that is represented to them, but these meanings have nothing objective, normative, or transcendent, since they belong to the order of self-referential reality. While the beads illustrate the transition from “sacramental” meaning to pretending hypocrisy, or pharisaic “sorcery,” and finally, from the latter, to pure simulacrum, the BlackBerry “compensates” for this loss by providing a “transcendence” *en trompe-l’oeil*, that is to say, the access to a realm that reigns as supreme source of information and, as such, claims the status of technological “sacrament” and criterion of reality.

Performance and representation

The trends sketched above call for a distinction between two dimensions, indeed two sorts, of culture, that may help better understand what is at stake. Culture can be considered either in its “representational” dimension, or according to its “performative” and “functional” aspect. The word “representational” indicates culture as a primary producer of representations of the world, and also, *a priori*, as a specific metaphysical and epistemological carving of reality. Culture is, in that sense, a way of understanding and defining the world and the role of mankind in it. All great religious civilisations belonged to this representational order: they “explained” the world. While religion transcends culture, both as a metaphysical representation and as an inner way of “realising” it, traditional culture is

1 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 1994, p. 6.

2 Goethe, *Faust*, translated by C.F. MacIntyre, New Directions, New York 1949, p. 40.

3 “In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.” Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Black and Red, Detroit, Michigan 1983, p. 5.

innervated by religion. Thus, in Islam, *tawhīd* or “unification through Unity” has provided the central principle and means of actualisation of the Islamic “representational” culture. Contrastingly, the words “performative and functional” signify cultures in which the immediate and interactive aspects of life shape individuals and make them participants in a community, in a way that clearly distinguishes their community from other communities. Anthropologists have sometimes made use of this concept of “performative culture” to bring home the point that “to be in being a game needs to be played, a festival needs to be celebrated, a drama needs to be performed, and a language needs to be spoken [...] in the same way to be in being a culture needs to be performed.”⁴ Any tribal, ethnic or national culture pertains to this category: it functions by means of communicative symbols that bind the collectivity together and cement its identity. Performative culture is also “functional” in that it defines its participants in terms of diverse organic functions “in the game”, in terms of a whole and its parts. Most often the label of performative culture may be generally applied to any unit of social interaction that entails specific norms and practices signifying its identity. As a matter of course, there is an overlap between “representational” and “performative” cultures. Religious culture, for example, always includes a performative dimension, whether interactive, ceremonial or ritual, although this dimension is intrinsically associated with the representation the culture conveys, as illustrated by the relationship between rites and myths whereby the former functions as the enactment of the metaphysical narrative. Conversely, performative cultures do not exclude representation, if only because they approach and “perform” reality in a way that presupposes a certain *a priori* relationship with it. In traditional civilisations and societies, each of these two kinds of cultures is distinct, and integrated. Thus, religious culture provides the metaphysical vision of civilization, and ethnic culture its human style; although the two types of culture are definitely not conflated, they are nonetheless articulated in a hierarchical and organic way. In our context, the category of traditional subsumes all pre-modern universes of meaning in which tradition—whether or not there is a name for it—is understood as an all-encompassing set of beliefs and practices transmitted by a transcendent and nonhuman source of knowledge, while being interpreted, elaborated and systematised by human beings in socio-cultural contexts. So the epitome of “representational culture” is traditional civilisation inasmuch as it flows from a normative metaphysical perception and interpretation of reality. It is a “cosmos” that “represents” the transcendent reality, or that translates it in human terms. As such it corresponds by and large to what Baudrillard refers to as “the sacramental order”, and to what Foucault theorised as the regime of resemblance, or the epistemologically transparent “Prose of the World” in his “archaeology of knowledge”.⁵ Such an order defines, at various degrees and in widely differing modes, the locus of identity, both personal and communal, which means that identity cannot be severed from “religious” representation. To speak in traditional Islamic terms, for example, the answer to the question “what is your *dīn*—your religion?” is the most fundamental marker of identity, so much so that the failure to answer this question would amount to the recognition of an utter lack of *being*. Hence the fundamental perplexity of traditional, or semi-traditional, people when confronted with the modern, or post-modern, secular subject. In such a traditional

4 Agarwala, Binod Kumar, “Performative Culture of Tribes and Modernity in India’s Northeast”, in: The NEHU Journal, 10 (1) (2012), pp. 11-12.

5 Michel Foucault, *Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Routledge, London 1989, p. 19.

context, the performative or functional culture pertains to a different level of reality, one that is not equivalent to representational culture, but is more or less harmoniously and organically linked to it. The anonymous author of the 19th century Russian spiritual classic *The Way of a Pilgrim*, could identify himself first of all as a Christian and a sinner, leaving his Russian identity as a secondary marker; and so was the case, or would be the case, for traditionally-minded Muslims and Buddhists. In this perspective, representation has epistemological and axiological precedence over “performance”, even though the two intertwine.

The media as “religious” representation

With the collapse of traditional worlds, the entrance into modernity and the advent of ideology, and more recently the rise of mediatised and globalised postmodernity, the old representational cultures have gradually receded, and certainly ceased to be normative, through a process of so-called secularisation. This has not meant that religious identifications and practices have necessarily decreased—in fact the contrary may be true for the last decades—, but rather that the religious *weltanschauung* is no longer the validating principle of truth and reality, the normative source of representation and cohesion that it used to be. So where does representational culture now lie? It can be argued that, in terms of representation, it is the electronic and digital reality, or the virtual world and its global system of icons and numbers that occupies the centre-stage of representation, as a functional substitute for religion. The electronic, virtual and globalised network represents reality to those who receive it, and connect to it. The “eye witness” of today’s news has replaced the witness, in the etymological sense of *shāhid* or martyr, of all-encompassing principles. The matter is not to bear witness to truth as reality, as in religious discourse, but to bear witness to “reality”—this term being provisional and approximate, if not inadequate, and preferably replaced by “actuality”—as “truth,” meaning the “truth” of the lack of truth. Indeed, “reality” is but phenomenal reality: events and words in their bare factuality, or so at least is the asymptotic “ideal” object of “witnesses.”

In the modern world, the culture of representation involves phenomena—etymologically “appearances”—and not metaphysical realities; it entails transitory and epistemologically indeterminate occurrences. We are invited to participate in a culture of events and facts which are ever happening in the mediating present of “news” or “*actualités*”, but which do not convey any meaning “transcending” their own “story.” In this world, performative culture has no organic link to representational culture: one could say that the latter is like the flat background of the former, as a sequence of CNN images is the background of the daily “performance” of the office clerk, or as a series of CNN sound-bites is the audio backdrop of a business lunch. This means that, in a kind of reversal, the representational culture of post-modernity is in fact purely performative, while—as we will see—performative cultures ardently claim to the status of representational reality, or are surreptitiously substituted to the latter. The all-embracing, mediatised and disconnected narrative of the contemporary world is performative in that it does not represent a transcendent reality, but features an ever changing, moving, interactive flow of information and communication. By contrast, the performative cultures that shape the identity of humans in their daily interactions through codes, languages and practices, tend to be elevated, particularly in religious contexts, to the level of quasi-metaphysical representation, in order to fill a

vacuum of meaning. As a result, meaning is primarily performative. Performances become sources of meaning in themselves, hence the formalistic and communitarian imperative of most contemporary religious phenomena, to which we will return.

Media, religious culture and identity

What does the change in representational culture, from metaphysics to bare “communication” and information, signify for the relationship between personal identity and culture? First, it is productive of a widening gap between the world of virtual and mediatised representation and the actual world of cultural practices at the performative and functional level. This results in two tendencies: on the one hand, we see forms of what Daryush Shayegan has called “cultural schizophrenia”⁶—that is to say, a non-integrated dual vision of reality, both “modern” and “traditional”, and, on the other hand, a growing individualisation of culture. In the latter case, the locus of cultural identity shifts to a more and more idiosyncratic, polymorphic, mobile and fluid space. In other cases, the need for a unifying representational culture leads to a search for substitutes in order to oppose the flattened reality (to use Thomas Friedman’s metaphor⁷) of mediatised and digital representation. In such cases, performative, communitarian culture is promoted, often militantly so, to the rank of representational culture. This is particularly the case with religious identities—the immense majority of contemporary religious cultures—which have become disconnected, or orphaned, from the legacy of meaning of integral traditional worlds. In such cases, we attend either a kind of religious absolutisation of performative identity, as in the case of aggressive nationalist and nativist movements, or a conflation of the religious/representational and the performative/communitarian in which, for example, religious and ethnic identity become indissociable, as in Malaysian Islam for instance; or else a transformation of what used to be representational in purely performative phenomena, which is the destiny of most contemporary religious confessions, as illustrated by the fact, well-noted by Olivier Roy, that “one of the characteristics of modern fundamentalisms is to replace spirituality with a system of norms and codes.”⁸

The meanings of multiculturalism

The *problématique* of contemporary multiculturalism is largely connected to these shifts and confusions. It bears stressing, however, that most analysts would distinguish between circumstantial multiculturalism, or multiculturalism *de facto*, and ideological multiculturalism or multiculturalism *de jure*. One is a matter of circumstances, the other of ideology. The first understanding is societal, while the second is communitarian. The former type is a result of the manifold processes of exchange and communication that have produced, through increased and facilitated access to cultural goods, an internationalisation of culture, particularly within industrialised, so-called developed, societies. This state of affairs, that has undergone an exponential increase with the digital revolution, has contributed to altering the cultural homogeneity of Western, and to an increasing extent non-Western,

6 Daryush Shayegan, *Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies Confronting the West*, London 1992.

7 Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, Vancouver 2007.

8 Olivier Roy, *Holy Ignorance. When Religion and Culture Part Ways*, Columbia University, New York 2010, p. 216.

societies, thereby shifting the centre of cultural identification from the group to the individual. This is, in a sense, the ultimate outcome of a process of individualisation of culture that some sociologists, like Louis Dumont, have traced back to a secularisation of the Christian ethos of the “individual outside of the world”⁹, one in which the autonomy of the Christian soul, through its primary inner attachment to the transcendent, translates into a position of “extra-territoriality” in relation to non-Christian societal norms. Sociologists and psychologists have analysed various dimensions of this cultural individualisation such as the individualised negotiations of entrance into adulthood¹⁰ or the contemporary emergence of the individual as “‘planning office’ of his or her life.”¹¹ Recently, Western societies have tended to promote the values and benefits of such an individualised multiculturalism inasmuch as it represents, at least theoretically, the democratic horizon of individual freedom. In a sense, this multicultural model is perfectly compatible with the “anti-communitarianism” of the French brand (*anti-communautarisme*), since it tends to disconnect acculturation from collective belonging without hampering the individual adhesion to, and abiding by, civic principles and norms. It could be said, moreover, that this multiculturalism is very much synchronous with contemporary media, if not to a large extent a product of it. It proceeds from an apparent increased capacity on the part of individuals to manufacture their own respective cultural kits by collecting discrete items provided by media and virtual sources. This is the theoretical model of contemporary individualism. The second type of multiculturalism is of quite a different sort. Olivier Roy, reflecting views largely shared on the European continent, describes it as follows: “We live in ‘archipelagic’ societies. We are in fact in sub-cultures that ultimately deny their affiliation to an encompassing and lasting culture”.¹² This is “ideological” multiculturalism as a socio-political normative project, which is often—if not always legitimately—identified with the Anglo-Saxon model of a multicultural society.

Multiculturalism and traditional civilisations

Multiculturalism as a *de facto* and—in a sense—*de jure*, phenomenon is not an exclusively contemporary matter. World civilisations flowing from Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, have been indeed multicultural, if not multiculturalist. While Buddhism arose from an Indian context, Christianity from a Jewish framework, and Islam from an Arab cultural

9 Louis Dumont, *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992.

10 “Now, individuals are expected to be self-directed in their life courses, but have fewer normative directives to follow. In this anomic but individualized culture. People attempting to enter ‘adulthood,’ as well as ‘adults’ themselves, find that they have fewer cultural restrictions on their choices than existed in the past, but they also have fewer cultural patters to follow to govern their lives. The institutional and normative patterns that have undergone deconstructing include gender relations, parent-child relations, ethnic/racial relations, and intergenerational obligations. There has also been a decline in the consensus regarding how to structure the institutions developed during the early modern and late modern periods, such as mass education. In addition, the pre-modern foundational institutions of the family and religion have lost their legitimacy among a sizable proportion of the population [...]” James E. Côté and Charles G. Levine, *Identity Formation, Agency, and Culture: A Social Psychological Synthesis*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, New Jersey 2002, p. 62. See also Jens O. Zinn, *Social Theories of Risk and Uncertainty: An Introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford 2008, p. 182.

11 *Social Theories of Risk and Uncertainty: An Introduction*, edited by Jens O. Zinn, Blackwell, Oxford 2008, p. 182.

12 Roy, *Holy Ignorance* 2010, p. 217.

ambience, all three religions transcended their respective original terrains, both in terms of the universality of their message, and in view of the early adhesion of a number of non-Indians, non-Jews and non-Arabs to their messages. We may, for example, regard medieval *al-Andalus* or seventeenth-century Mughal India as Islamic multicultural societies. In such instances, the culturally diverse Islamic civilization was unified by a metaphysical unity of creed, and the same held true *mutatis mutandis* for Christendom and the Buddhist world. It has been said that religion means a vertical link to God, and a horizontal link between individuals and cultures. So an Indonesian Muslim and a Western African Muslim may be very different “performatively”—aside from their ritual life, but they share, “representationally”, the same vertical link to the God of the *Qur’ān*, which makes it possible for their respective local cultures to develop their own genius under the same civilisational canopy. Thus, in traditional Islamic and Christian civilisations, metaphysical principles used to connect and unify variegated human cultures under the aegis of transcendence and universal metaphysical meaning. This was true across the geo-cultural zone of each civilisation, but also in particular cosmopolitan centres of knowledge and culture, such as, for example, medieval Cairo and Constantinople. One of the hallmarks of traditional and classical Islam was precisely its ability to be both and at the same time one in its metaphysical message and multicultural in its manifestations. It is precisely because of the transcendent and universal nature of *tawhīd* that the cultural diversity of the Islamicised world could be integrated within its fold. The diversity of the Divine Qualities or *ṣifāt* and their reflections in the multiplicity of God’s signs or *āyāt* in the universe and in the soul was understood as a source of civilisational enrichment through *ihtilāf* or difference. In other words, acceptance and integration of diversity were possible because Unity and diversity were clearly situated on different levels, and not conflated or flattened down as they tend to be in contemporary Islamist discourse, and also because diversity was conceived as a manifestation of the inner infinitude of Unity and not in contradiction to it. This appears quite clearly in Islamic art which, as Titus Burckhardt brilliantly demonstrated,¹³ conveys the unity of the Islamic vision through the cultural diversity of its forms, and not against it.

Responses to mediatised multiculturalism

What sets modern multiculturalism apart from such historical precedents is its lack of any real civilisational and metaphysical foundation. Thus, the mediatised and the virtual play, today, to some extent at least, the role of religion in holding together a diversity of cultures under a unity of perception. However, this perception is not metaphysical but informational; it is circumstantial and fleeting. The global media citizen participates in an electronic and virtual world of events and information that weave his or her perception of the

13 “If one were to reply to the question ‘what is Islam?’ by simply pointing to one of the masterpieces of Islamic art such as, for example, the Mosque of Cordova, or that of Ibn Ṭulūn in Cairo, or one of the *madrasahs* in Samarqand or even the Taj Mahal, that reply, summary as it is, would be nonetheless valid, for the art of Islam expresses what its name indicates, and it does so without ambiguity. Granted that its modes of expression vary according to the ethnic surroundings and the passing of the centuries—though more upon the former than the latter—they are nearly always satisfying, as much from the aesthetic point of view as from that of their spiritual aim: they involve no disharmony, and the same cannot be asserted of all domains of Islamic culture.” Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*, World Wisdom, Bloomington, Indiana 2009, p. xv.

world. This is what could be called global “multiculturalism”: a global community which, irrespective of performative cultures, is as if “hanging” on to the “real time” of mediatised reality. The question, of course, is to know whether this media-generated community does, or does not, erase the diversity of performative cultures it relates. Numerous signs show that it does, as testified symbolically by the striking similitude between the metropolitan skylines of the world. When confronted with this hegemony of the new representational culture, it seems that three diverging ways open for contemporary mankind.

The first consists in acknowledging, and sometimes welcoming, that performative cultures, in their specificity, may be disappearing, heading enthusiastically toward a monocultural universe free from communitarian clashes and conflicts. The second response is one of fierce resistance to so-called cultural globalisation. This often takes the form, or at least the rhetorical form, of a “cultural war” that involves antagonism, if not hostility, toward globalisation. Thirdly we can also recognise the possibility of a disconnection between “mediatised globalisation” and “identifying culture”, one being superimposed upon the other, in a kind of cultural schizophrenia. To simplify matters, it could be said that the first scenario entails an evacuation of collective diversity, the second implies a disintegration by means of “explosive” diversity, while the third involves both unity and diversity, but in a way that is radically un-integrated or “schizophrenic,” “flattened” and not hierarchised.

Religion in the matrix of mediatised reality

How does this network of conflicting tendencies involve and affect religious phenomena and their transformation? Needless to say, an exhaustive response to such a broad question would go well beyond the scope of our current inquiry. To wit, Heidi Campbell has recently documented the complexities and paradoxes of the manifold relationships between religious communities and the new media.¹⁴ Our purpose herein is simply to provide a few axiological orientations.

A first important crystallisation of the aforementioned trends is the formation of a humanitarian, ethical, global authority that tends to function as a substitute for the moral magisterium of religions. It is what some critics have alarmingly referred to as the threatening emergence of a One World Religion. The second outcome, by contrast—or in response to the first—is the hardening of religious identities, often around literalistic, formalistic, ethnic and/or socio-political lines. This is what has been most often labelled, albeit often all too facilely, if not erroneously, as fundamentalism. In a sense, it means that performative cultures are erecting themselves as representational counter-cultures, or—and the two motions are sometimes fused—that representational cultures are collapsing into performative ones. It means, for example, the sacralisation of ethnicity, or the ethnicization of religion, both resulting in Barber’s “Lebanonisation” of the world.¹⁵ Thirdly, there is the

14 Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media*, Routledge, London 2010.

15 “Just beyond the horizon of current events lie two possible political futures—both bleak, neither democratic. The first is a retribalisation of large swaths of humankind by war and bloodshed: a threatened Lebanonization of national states in which culture is pitted against culture, people against people, tribe against tribe—a Jihad in the name of a hundred narrowly conceived faiths against every kind of interdependence, every kind of artificial social cooperation and civic mutuality. The second is being borne in on us by the onrush of economic and ecological forces that demand integration and uniformity and that mesmerise the world with fast music,

permanence of religion as a purely private, often sentimental if not fantasmatic, more or less marginalised and fragile reality.

In this diverse, and in fact contradictory, religious landscape, the role of the new media is complex. Certainly, in the binary of *jihad* and McWorld sketched by Benjamin Barber in the 1990s, satellite media and cyberspace lie squarely on the side of the latter. However, the whole picture reveals more ambivalent interplays. First, the cultural units of resistance characteristic of performative cultures standing as representational cultures are constrained, within the logic of virtual communication, and therefore survival, to enter the global network. Doing so, they are, sometimes as if against the grain of their own leaning, drawn into the global “matrix” of representations. On the one hand, it may seem that the virtual and mediatised multiplication of sources of knowledge as information may open the way, particularly on the internet, to alternative narratives and interpretations that subvert both the global order of simulation and the ossified, formalistically normative, authority of external remnants of representational/religious cultures. A number of studies have been devoted to such trends, particularly in Islam, that show, for example, the conventional authority of ‘*ulamā*’ circumvented, or even questioned, by new sources of information. In Aini Linjakumpu’s words, “the Internet provides a powerful forum for alternative Islamic expression that might be aimed against mainstream ideas and ideologies in different Islamic domains”.¹⁶ In point of fact, and perhaps paradoxically, some of the most stridently anti-globalist religious movements find a particularly fitting mode of expression in the internet and other modes of contemporary communication given that their “ideological formatting” is independent from, and indeed incompatible with, the sacralised moral and human mediations that used to inform traditional religious expansion. The growing influence of Salafi internet-based sources of authority bears witness to this paradox, which is only so in appearance since it manifests, in its own way, a formal and ideological flattening down of religion.¹⁷ On the other hand, one may wonder whether this virtual “resistance” is not ultimately undermined by what Olivier Roy has called the “standardisation” and “Protestantisation” of religions¹⁸ and, more fundamentally, by the very nature of the media of the information age. Standardisation, epitomised by the shift in reference from religions in the plural to religion in the singular, proceeds with a contemporary “formatting” (Roy), uniformisation and commodification of religious phenomena. This is perhaps the ultimate and aberrant end result of a process of “reification” of faiths into religious systems of representation that Wilfred Cantwell Smith highlighted in his seminal *The*

fast computers, and fast food—with MTV, Macintosh, and McDonald’s, pressing nations into one commercially homogenous global network: one McWorld tied together by technology, ecology, communications, and commerce. The planet is falling precipitantly apart AND coming reluctantly together at the very same moment.” Benjamin Barber, in *Readings in Globalization: Key Concepts and Major Debates*, edited by George Ritzer, Zeynep Atalay, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford 2010, p. 290.

16 Michael Bailey and Guy Redden, *Mediating Faiths. Religion and Socio-Cultural Change in the Twenty-First Century*, Ashgate, Farnham, UK 2011, p. 39.

17 One may object that a number of contemporary Christian and Islamic missionary movements, such as the *Tablīgī Ġamā’at* (arab. *Ġamā’at Tablīg*) or neo-Evangelical churches, also rely primarily on such types of religious mediations and human interactions. While an acknowledgment of similar contemporary religious phenomena must lead us to be weary of theoretical overgeneralizations, it bears noting that such missionary efforts, even when relatively informal in their organizational structure, remain largely standardised and “syllabified” along the lines of their formal agenda.

18 Roy, *Holy Ignorance*, p. 187. We would rather speak of “Neo-Protestantization.”

Meaning and End of Religion.¹⁹ For Smith, this “reification” already occurred when the living faith and relationship with the transcendent that lies at the core of the religious consciousness began to be objectified and systematised into a “religion”. What Roy described is a similar, but exponentially intensified, contemporary trend resulting in “mutant religions”: globalised culture needs to be able to deal with the product “religion” in a way that fits its categories and processes. Hence, a standardisation and “syllabification” of the modes of identification, representation and communication of religions that Roy illustrates through the example of the routine extension of the standardised label of “chaplain” to representatives of non-Christian religious communities. The type of “brochure” for mission or *da‘wa*, or the “explanatory” template for religious dissemination, also symbolise the “spirit” of this process of mass proselytisation. These trends are parallel to the claims of an “easy” access to religious expertise, in parallel to the “anti-elitism” that characterise religious reformism and neo-evangelicalism. Thus can be explained, for example, “Salafism’s appeal to modern believers: religious knowledge can be acquired easily; to become a scholar is not an impossible feat.”²⁰ Moreover, this facility implies “a personally empowering and salvific process for every legally competent Muslim”²¹, as it does *mutatis mutandis* for the born-again Christian who has “easily” gained access to the Redemptory Mystery. In addition, the neo-Protestantising process refers to a commodification of religion wedded to the values and practices of modern capitalism, and more or less indissociable from the Western modes of democratisation and globalisation. Moreover this “neo-Protestantisation”, or one might say “neo-Evangelicalisation” involves a radical move away from any metaphysical, mystical and liturgical context, and toward a promotion of the subjective and emotional, mediatically experiential, components of current-day religiosity. “Puritanical reformism” illustrates by and large an Islamic version of some of these tendencies, with the difference that the stress lays therein primarily upon normative formal practices. Here again, formal orthopraxy can go side by side with contemporary popular culture, such as clothing and music, without any sense of discrepancy. Thus, paradoxically, “radical” and “purist” religious movements can either “cohabit” with much of globalised culture—at the exclusion of some of its moral contents or even manifest an affinity with some of its features, including the most “trivial” ones. This makes it possible for religions to be assimilated into the hegemonic representational culture.

In response to this danger, some traditionalists from various faiths have denounced, as alluded to earlier, the emergence of a One World Religion, which they fear may be substituted for the diverse specific faiths through virtual instances and globally sanctioned “moral authorities.” The One World Religion conspiracy theories aim at showing how, in response to what is perceived as the explosion of religious conflicts and violence, a single moral abstract doctrine and system of representations would make it possible for globalised institutions to assert a religious control over the world. Lee Penn, a traditionalist Catholic, has provided alarming critiques of what he considers to be an elitist alliance of such diverse institutions as the post-Vatican II Church, the White House and the United Religions Initiative to substitute traditional theological dogmas with a new faith. His ar-

19 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Minneapolis 1991.

20 Bernard Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action”, in: *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement*, edited by Roel Meijer, Columbia University Press, New York 2009, p. 45.

21 Ibid.

gument is that the unity of modern mankind under a single power cannot be currently achieved through atheism or agnosticism, but rather through a global neo-religious system disconnected from Divine Revelation and traditional religions.²² Charles Upton has argued, in a similar vein, that the Antichrist could be understood symbolically as the subversive power of destruction emanating from the polar opposition between neo-spiritual McWorld and religious jihad: “I believe the system of Antichrist will emerge—is in fact emerging—out of the conflict between the New World Order and the spectrum of militant reactions against it.”²³

Pricking the triumphant bubble

Beyond, or in spite of, this opposition, the ineluctability of the globalizing trend is hardly in doubt, since even exclusive identity has to be “represented”, and can only be within the network of the normative information culture. If the “sacred” is defined, with Mircea Eliade, as entailing heterogeneity in space and time,²⁴ marking the distinction between a domain of the profane and one of the sacred, it could be argued that the “digitalisation” and mediatisation of religion, by involving a necessary homogenisation inherent to the media, excludes the sacred *per se*, and cannot therefore but desacralise the object “religion.” Thus, the “real time” and “cyberspace” of mediatised information constitute formidable tools of evacuation of the sacred. Moreover, seen through the normative lenses of the globalised and digital hegemonic culture, would-be counter-cultures cannot but be reduced to the status of “non-culture” or modes of “holy ignorance” to make use of Olivier Roy’s term. If, as Kees Bolle has argued,²⁵ knowledge has been levelled down to information, and if information can only be available through the normative culture, then any marginal deviation from the latter can only be dismissed as ignorance. It is interesting and revealing to see, for example, how Roy subtly dismisses what he considers to be “magical” elements in religious practices, like the traditional Roman Catholic Tridentine Mass in Latin, since they cannot be reduced to a post-Enlightenment, rationalistic, definition of knowledge.²⁶ Thus, the expulsion of religious representations and practices in the outer darkness of what Roy calls “culture” may lead to the insidious rise of totalitarian practices, in a way reminiscent of the myth of the celebrated 1999 movie, “The Matrix”, in which a world is depicted wherein reality is confined to the boundaries of normative information, therefore knowledge, and isolated from emancipating reality. In this situation of complete alienation, the character of Neo—whose name hints at the horizon of a spiritual regeneration akin to

22 “Atheism (Marxist or otherwise) cannot be the basis of an enduring civilization. All of the regional and continental civilizations that have existed until now have been sustained by religion [...] Globalists and inter-faith activists understand that religion is the basis of an enduring civilization.” Lee Penn, *The Religious Face of the New World Order*, Owings, Maryland 2010, p. 6.

23 Charles Upton, *The System of Antichrist. Truth and Falsehood in Postmodernism and the New Age*, Sophia Perennis 2001, p. 41.

24 Eliade Mircea, *The Sacred and the Profane*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, San Diego, California 1987.

25 Jennifer I. M. Reid, *Religion and Global Culture*, Oxford 2003, p. 27.

26 Interestingly, it is this sort of “magical” understanding that the Council Vatican II was already criticizing in the name of an “enlightened” pastoral discourse when affirming that “On the one hand a more critical ability to distinguish religion from a magical view of the world and from the superstitions which still circulate purifies it and exacts day by day a more personal and explicit adherence to faith. As a result many persons are achieving a more vivid sense of God” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 7).

Saint Paul's "New Man"—with the assistance of the female character Trinity—no doubt an allusion to the soteriological power of transcendent grace—leads the resistance to the deceptive Matrix of counter-reality. The final ability of the characters to free themselves from the Matrix through discerning intelligence—which allows them to understand the nature of the system and manipulate its power, and the grace of sacrificial and redemptive love that connects them with a liberating reality—conveys strong metaphysical and religious connotations suggesting a fundamental rift between what Baudrillard would call the "sacramental order"—which corresponds to the traditional regime of *adaequatio* where signs are thought to relate to realities—and the order of simulation from which any sense of reality is banished.

Curiously, quite ahead of the advent of cyberspace, René Guénon described the contemporary "illusion of 'ordinary life'" as the main impediment to a metaphysically sound perception of reality, in the form of a kind of collective suggestion, a bubble of illusion claiming reality.²⁷ For Guénon, so-called "ordinary life" is nothing but a delusion akin to the Hindu notion of *Māyā*, or the veil of existence that covers the true nature of Reality. It proceeds from an internalised materialism that creates conditions "under [which] the sensible world can appear [...] as a closed system, in the interior of which they [contemporary humans] feel themselves to be in perfect security."²⁸ Guénon's analysis may be deemed to have gained an exponentially heightened relevance with the rise of the world of cyberspace: a bubble within a bubble, an illusion within an illusion.

Freedom and the interiorisation of tradition

Is there any horizon of freedom and knowledge left open in this threatening configuration? Between the flattening homogenisation imposed by the globalised representational culture, and the hardened, suffocating, fragile and indeed desperate affirmation of residual performative cultures vying for resistance, what margin of autonomy might be left? Any response to these questions should be prefaced by the remark that the aforementioned polar opposition cannot in any way be read as a symmetrical *rapport de force*. There is, indeed, an ineluctability of the triumph of the dominant representational culture, whose global advances are exponential, and against which the poverty of intellectual, spiritual and material resources of would-be countercultures is all too obvious. When writing about the "reign of quantity" in 1945, Guénon was alerting his readers to the hegemonic power of our times, which is quantity, that is to say, the pre-eminence of quantitative considerations in all areas of our life, from statistics to mass production. He further distinguished two phases in this dominance of quantity over quality—the latter being defined as a principle of intrinsic intelligibility and differentiation: solidification and dissolution. He associated the former with nineteenth century materialism and scientism, and their sequels, and traced the latter to neo-spiritualism, or the advent of non-traditional or counter-traditional forms of individual, if not individualistic, and phenomenist self-realisation. This view delineates two phases in the reign of quantity: the first corresponds to solidification as a process resulting from a greater and greater emphasis on continuous quantity, as illustrated first and foremost by the logic of productivism and consumption; the second takes us to the level of

27 René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, Munshiram Manoharlal 2000, p. 126.

28 Guénon, *Reign of Quantity*, p. 132.

discontinuous quantity and, although Guénon died too early to draw any conclusion in this respect, the digital revolution does indeed epitomise this movement toward pure quantity in the sense of discontinuous number, since it is ultimately founded on binary numerical quantity. This is properly the phase of dissolution that Guénon would have no doubt assigned to the reign of cyberspace and global information. Quantity being strictly speaking the domain of non-intelligibility, its paroxysm was to be manifested in post-modernity as a negation of inherent and adequate intelligibility. Quality, by contrast, implies a transcendence of quantitative factors, through which the flower, for example, cannot be reduced to its quantitative physical and chemical determinations. Such a transcendence can only be realised if a sense of inner autonomy and independence from global systems and virtual networks is actualised. In this sense, there cannot be any other locus of transcendence but the person in his or her irreducible inwardness and free-will. This spiritual interiority is not to be equated, however, to the mere psychological and individualistic privacy of “neo-Protestantised” religion, if only because it is founded on a keen distinction between psychic individuality and the universal realm of the Spirit, and also because it presupposes a “sacramental” nourishment through the ritual and consecrated means of the revealed and collective tradition. It is on the basis of such an “objective” traditional grounding that an inner sense of identity rooted in the transcendent through metaphysical consciousness and spiritual self-cultivation can provide the interactive subjectivity with an anchoring deep enough to navigate and negotiate, not to say resist, the suggestive powers of global simulacra, without drifting away or falling apart. The BlackBerry may perhaps be used without risk of alienation as long as the beads are more than simulative accessories, and no less than traditional “sacraments” of transcendence.

