Pinocchio goes to church
The religious life of avatars

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Abstract

Once hanging from Gepetto's threads, Pinocchio has freed himself from the dependency of his former master. The avatars of virtual worlds such as Second Life, are in their development far behind Pinocchio, being dependent upon their masters' mouse clicks.

Like Pinocchio, the avatars are social beings, interacting, socializing, flirting with their fellow avatars, and going to church. Some even build their own church. In a community without geographical borders a prayer meeting may gather participants without concern for temporal and spatial limitations.

Helland (2005) distinguishes between religion online (RO) and online religion (OR). RO denotes the situation in which organized religions (churches, congregations etc) establish a presence on the web, whereas the term OR is used to refer to religious practices on the web. RO is linked to established religious organizations' attempts to be of service to their actual and potential members. Through RO a church may do missionary and evangelizing work, by being present offering guidance when web users look for answers. OR, on the other hand, might be seen as a kind of bottom-up religion.

Woodhead och Heelas (2000, 2005) have suggested a subjective turn of religion in the West, from “life-as” to “subjective-life” forms of the sacred, i.e. religion giving way to spirituality. When studying religious practice among avatars in virtual worlds one observes that there is a significant turn towards community in that particular kingdom of subjectivity. Avatars seem to seek out religious community, and participate in prayer meetings and services, thereby showing a willingness to accept a certain, pre-defined form of spirituality.

In this paper it will be discussed whether avatar religiosity, seen as a culmination of the subjective turn, is an avant-garde turning back to its origins, life-as, and religion-as. If that is the case it will have obvious repercussions on organized religion, on church, mission, and missiology.

Introduction

Pinocchio is a marionette, a puppet made of pine (hence his name), carved by carpenter Gepetto. Miraculously, he manages to escape the control of his maker and master, taking on a life of his own. The story about the little fellow is told by Carlo Collodi (1905) and has been presented in books, in films (Walt Disney 19401, Roberto Benigni 20022), and in an opera by Jonathan Dove (20073). Collodi's story stresses the fact that Pinocchio – in his liberated life – is tempted to tell lies, but that he as a consequence of telling lies develops a long nose. My use of him lies not in the fact that he is more or less trustworthy (i.e. the length of his nose), but in the fact that he has escaped the direct control of his puppeteer.

In the original sense of the word, avatars (avatara, which means "descending") are representations of the god Vishnu (Schalk 1996:366f, Smart 1989:85). A recent film, Avatar by James

1 Luske and Sharpsteen (1999).
3 Duncan (2009).
Cameron (2009), exploits the theme. In the Internet age more generally, however, the term is used somewhat less pregnantly for representations on the screen or in a virtual environment. Often these representations are shaped like humans, probably since they most often represent human beings. Citing Philip Rosedale, creator of Second Life, an avatar is “the representation of your chosen embodied appearance to other people in a virtual world”. Somewhere a non-visual agent, a puppeteer, is pulling the strings, i.e. the keyboard, which commands the avatar to move, dance, talk, fall in love, and – go to church.

Leasure time, health and entertainment

In the age of the Internet increasing proportions of the available time in the Western world has become free time, leisure time. The number of hours an average citizen has to spend at work diminishes, and increasingly more hours are becoming available for private activities or activities involving one’s self. The free time is not equally distributed in a population; its distribution follows economic, social and cultural lines of familiar sociological kind. Something similar may be said about the parts of the industrialized world not belonging to the West. Furthermore it can be shown that the proportion of the work force indulged in the production of food and goods is diminishing, whereas the proportion working with health and culture is increasing (Nybom 1997). Less hands and hours are needed to feed hungry stomachs, more hands and hours are needed to keep the bodies fit and the souls entertained. Castells (2001:235—239) confirms parts of Nybom’s picture: work within the sectors agriculture and industry decreases. Castell’s tables, however, do not present as clear cut figures for the health business and culture as does Nybom.

Fruits of creativity

Virtual worlds, where the persons of the physical world are represented by avatars, open possibilities of different ways of being. According to the Association of Virtual Worlds, there are about 300 worlds for games, sociability, education and communication (The blue book : A consumer guide to virtual worlds 2008). In virtual worlds, alternative ways of living can be constructed, sometimes by an initiating creator, sometimes by the ordinary users or inhabitants. Artifacts, rooms, social and institutional structures are created in ways similar to the art, buildings, societies and religions of the physical world, only inhibited by imagination and to a certain degree technical knowledge. The results of creativity in virtual worlds do not replace art and structures in the physical world, but being expressions of human creativity they may be analyzed in a way parallel to the analysis of results of creativity in the physical world.

Religious organizations

In the physical world there are structures mediating experiences of encounters with the holy, defined by Fenn (2001:4) as “the institution by which individuals and groups, communities and societies attempt to transcend the passage of time”. In virtual worlds one finds arrangements aiming at transcending time and space in order to give the participant an experience of holiness. One also finds religion, which, again following Fenn (2001:6), may be defined as “a way of tying together multiple experiences and memories of the sacred into a single system of belief and practice”. In virtual worlds avatars (Pinocchios) seek experiences of holiness, and constructors (Bob the Builders), using various kinds of entrepreneurial activity, attempt to create environments where avatars’ (people’s) experiences of the holy may be held together in a system of meaning or belonging.

When investigating holiness in virtual worlds both these groups are important: the avatars (and their agents) seeking meaning, and the entrepreneurs (and their avatars) constructing systems and artifacts. When doing research it is necessary to try to go behind the avatars to their agents. The seekers of the holy, coming back to program activities in virtual environments, have – so it is hypothesized – reasons to do so. There are reasons to believe that they seek and get experiences of the holy through their participation. Similarly, the entrepreneurs may be hypothesized to have similar motives for investing their time, ingenuity and money in the construction of virtual environments and artifacts. Their motivation may be experiences of the holy: a builder of a cathedral may participate in services in her own cathedral, or she may have done something that pleases her God. Probably there is an element of entrepreneurial satisfaction as well: when other avatars use one’s construction/building, it and oneself cannot be altogether worthless.

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5 An organization which January 2010 seems to have ceased to be active.
**Avatar and agent**

A basic complication to the investigation is the uncertainty about the relation between an agent and her avatar. Whoever meets an avatar does not know to what degree it mirrors its agent, i.e. expresses her identity. In some respects it is reasonable to assume that the avatar is a picture of its agent: when it comes to experience it makes no sense to talk about the avatar representing something which differs from the agent’s experience. An avatar taking part in a service and experiencing something there is a direct link to the experience of the agent. In other respects one may expect the opposite: the exterior design of an avatar is not necessarily mirroring the looks of its agent, and the behavior of an avatar is not necessarily similar to what the agent would normally do. In Figure 1 an attempt has been made to illustrate the mixture of mirroring and difference between the agent and the avatar.

**Figure 1** The mixture of mirroring and difference between the avatar and its agent

The proportion of life of its own in the avatar’s experience is expectedly small. At the other extreme one finds the avatar’s behavior, where a substantial degree of independence from the agent may be expected. Between these extremes emotion (with predominantly mirroring) and cognition are situated (with predominance for avatar independence). Uncertainty as to the degree of overlapping between the two is systematic in the study of virtual worlds. One may never know to what degree an avatar represents its puppeteer. In this respect, avatar research resembles ordinary research of human behavior. Everywhere when human behavior is studied a researcher must realize that she can never distinguish a façade (~the avatar) from the true content (~the agent). It is, however, not frequently necessary to incorporate this insight in a plan for methodology, which is a necessity in avatar research.

Based on this basic complication an important line of enquiry is the differences and similarities in the experience of the holy between the avatars and their agents, in the virtual and the physical world, respectively. Furthermore, the entrepreneurs’ inspiration and motivation to build structures (houses and congregations) as well as their methods for evaluation of these structures need to be analyzed.

**Theoretical tests**

In so doing two goals may be achieved. *Firstly*, it becomes possible to test if the theoretical developments outlined by secularization theory (Bruce 2002) and the theory about the subjective turn (Heelas and Woodhead 2005) are substantiated by the empirical study of virtual religion. *Secondly*, one may arrive at preliminary coordinates for tomorrow’s presumed creativity and spirituality, in other words, if and how Pinocchio is going to visit church and build congregation. It is indeed uncertain if the virtual world known today will exist in ten years time, but probably similar meeting places will arise, worlds in which virtual representations of physically existing human beings socialize and in each other’s company find ways to creativity, spirituality and experiences of the holy, experiences transcending the irrevocable passage of time (Fenn 2001).

**Theoretical considerations**

The phenomenon virtual rooms with a claim for holiness actualizes two theoretical discussions in the field of sociology of religion. One is about basic understanding of what constitutes religion, what the holy should be conceived as. The other discussion is about the development of religion in late modern society.

In the mixture of psychology and sociology of religion which in the North American context is called the scientific study of religion there is an ongoing discussion about central concepts such as religion and the holy, based on classical œuvres in these main areas (James 1902/1952, Durkheim 1912/2001, Otto 1917, and Weber 1904—1905/1934). In the European tradition religion is described as something dangerous. The holy must be exempt from everyday contact; only specially qualified persons may be allowed to come near it. This understanding resounds in the definition of religion which Durkheim (1912/2001:65) formulates:
In a project with a rather grand design, spirituality (the subtitle of Heelas & Woodhead (2005), see Repstad (2009:73)). Present Western society is characterized by the fact that the utmost authority has moved within the individual herself. In this respect Heelas & Woodhead take a similar position as that of Taylor (2007), that God tended to be an external entity in relation to people, keeping control from the outside, the holy or – using the book title of William James – the varieties of religious experience. In this tradition nothing is being said about essence or “inner nucleus” of the holy, or even its encounter with everyday life. The definition of the holy has been passed on to the individuals themselves. Their narratives relate how they have met the holy, and their stories are not to be controlled against some model of the holy defined in advance. Demerath suggests that religion and the holy should be defined in separate ways, religion substantially and the holy functionally, a suggestion leading Toplean (2009:34f) to question if the holy may be defined functionally only.

During the later part of the twentieth century the sociology of religion has been characterized by three major discussions, about (a) economic models for religious organizational development, also called supply side or rational choice reasoning (Warner 1993), (b) about secularization (Dobelare 1981, 2002), and (c) about religiosity not fitting into church organizations’ ideas of true doctrine, i.e. such phenomena that from the churches’ point of view appear as proofs of secularization. In this paper no concern is given to the supply side or rational choice theme. The secularization theme (b), however, is woven into the study of virtual religion and will appear later. The discussion about non conform religion (c) is where the analysis starts. There have been a large number of attempts to conceptually and terminologically identify those kinds of people’s religious thoughts and behavior that have no direct parallel in the doctrinal systems of the religious organizations. Demerath lists “invisible religion”, “folk religion”, “implicit religion”, “quasi-religion” and “para-religion”, and his list may be supplemented with “popular religion” (Maitre 1975, Schneider and Dornbusch 1973), “Leutereligion” (Zulehner 1982), “Vorhofreligion” (Mensching 1959:63), “spirituality” (Heelas and Woodhead 2005) or for Sweden “folk church religion” (Straarup 1985:33—36, 91—110), and “church service Christianity” (Gustafsson 1969:55—71, 1972).

The fact that religiosity defined as “other” has become stronger has been seen as one of the most important signs that a process of secularization is taking place. In this way one may say that the free religiosity of the avatars represents a late phase in the secularization process. Nonetheless pilot studies carried out in virtual reality environment show that the religiosity of the avatars is intense around the sites (places and activities) where the link to church organizations’ traditional symbols and forms of activity is strong: virtual cathedrals, traditional religious symbols, traditional services or prayer meetings (Schroeder, Heather, and Lee 1998, Hutchings 2007, Brasher 2004). The utmost expression of secularization bends back towards the symbol system it has left behind.

The subjective turn from “life-as” to “subjective-life” is one of the ways in which a non conform religion is being conceptualized in recent sociology of religion. Using mainly British material Heelas & Woodhead (2005) and Woodhead & Heelas (2000) argue that religiosity (and people’s experience of the holy) in late modern Western society is changing radically. If, in an earlier epoch, one might say that God tended to be an external entity in relation to people, keeping control from the outside, the present Western society is characterized by the fact that the utmost authority has moved within the individual herself. In this respect Heelas & Woodhead take a similar position as that of Taylor (2007), namely that the subjectivization of Western religious thought has led to that “religion is giving way to spirituality” (the subtitle of Heelas & Woodhead (2005), see Repstad (2009:72)).

In a project with a rather grand design, God’s nearest town (Ahlstrand & Gunner 2008), a number of Swedish researchers have been inspired by Heelas & Woodhead’s study of Kendal, a minor town in northern England, which has supplied them with material for their argumentation. The Swedish researchers have tried to reduplicate the results from Kendal, although with a minor success rate. It has not showed easy to find similarities to Kendal in Enköping, God’s nearest town in Sweden (Willander 2008:241—276), and this result or lack of result feeds into the present study.

Heelas & Woodhead (2005:6) argue that “subjective-life forms of the sacred” are increasing, while “life-as forms of the sacred” are decreasing. At first this conclusion seems to be substantiated by
the picture of the lonely avatar seeking an individual experience of the holy. *De facto*, the situation in the virtual worlds is more complex: in these worlds communities are being formed, prayer circles meet regularly. Perhaps one might say that the isolated avatar finds verification of its experience in its own subjectivity, but on the way it hunts out others, or a community. Tentatively the virtual worlds have been characterized as laboratories of the future, for instance by Rymaszewski et al. (2008). As such the virtual worlds do not one-sidedly point out a road of subjectivity and isolation for members of “the lonely crowd” (Riesman 1950). Even for isolated subjects such as avatars one may identify a road or path back to community. Pinocchio’s going to church, the religious life of avatars, open a possibility to describe individual religiosity of the future. In a strict sense of the word a test of Heelas & Woodhead’s claim is not possible, but since their central hypothesis is one of development (from “life-as forms of the sacred” to “subjective-life forms of the sacred”) an analysis of virtual worlds may become a corrective; avatar analysis points out a probable development, partly for avatars and their agents, partly for entrepreneurs quickly catching up on what the virtual population demands.

**From …**

*Latin America …*

David Martin (1990, 2002) as well as Bernice Martin (1998, 2001) have analyzed the development of Pentecostalism in Latin America. Bernice Martin investigates the factors leading to increasing numbers of members for Latin American Pentecostal congregations. Her analysis may be summarized in an almost classical way, in terms from Max Weber (1993) or even from Karl Marx (Marx and Engels 1972). The congregations or churches that make it easier for people to live decent lives, at the same time as they keep a sufficiently high temperature of experience in order to be attractive; those are the congregations or churches with growing membership.

According to Bernice Martin, for the Latin American urban middle class, and for those who aspire for entering it from below, life is hard. A number of traps may stop the ambition of a family, working hard to achieve basic security and safety. The wages are low, and so one must keep a tight budget. Temptations supported by a traditional macho culture lure especially men to ruin their families through drink, game, and prostitution. Cultural liberalization and individualization undermine stable families.

In a situation such as this the Pentecostal congregations’ message and demand for a specific way of life becomes a way for threatened families to make their situation safer. Being members of a Pentecostal congregation, the family income does not end up in the wrong pockets, fidelity in marital life is supported, and the families are stabilized since the husbands are at home when not working.

In Bernice Martin’s interpretation the religion that gives answers to the most important problems of everyday life, and that has the ability to support human dignity around the solution of these everyday problems, that is the religion with success. The interpretation has similarities with Friedrich Engels (1894) description of early Christianity. A religion giving meaning to a life in hardship, facilitating to build human dignity around the solution of everyday problems may be expected to get a big following.

… to virtual worlds, and …

If we turn towards Pinocchio’s religious life, applying Bernice Martin’s way of thinking to that kind of religiosity, we necessarily come back to Gepetto, the puppeteer, or, in more recent terms, to two questions: (a) what do anonymous avatar agents look for when they let their avatars run around in virtual worlds? (b) what is it that is sought for by entrepreneurs building castles in the air in virtual worlds? I will dare give a preliminary answer to both questions: they seek what helps them to solve their life problems with preserved human dignity.

… to missiology, and …

In the analysis of mission the perspective is turned around. The basic problem for missiology may be said to be in which ways and conditions the Christian church reaches individuals and groups with the specific message about Christ and his redemptory work, and under which circumstances the individual and the group internalize the message so that it becomes centre of their lives. The basic missiological approach contains a methodological issue: In what way should the Church communicate its message in the best way? The study of the religious life of avatars is to a large degree directed towards individual action whereas missiological theory, apart from aspects of communication theory, is characterized by a structural orientation.

Might then, one could ask, action oriented analysis of avatars point out directions for structure oriented missiology? In the theoretical field this might happen in the contribution of avatar analysis to
a description of the state of affairs. It is not unreasonable to regard religious life in virtual worlds as some kind of avant-garde, a laboratory of the future, in which a possible picture of tomorrow’s religious life is shown.

... to Denmark

In this picture individualization is a structural prerequisite. Through individualization people perceive a smaller demand for physical contact and isolate themselves in front of their computers. In this situation, however, they do not remain lonely. In the virtual worlds there are others to spend time with, simultaneously make-believe and real.

For some, time and attention is given to pluralist world view super markets, where all ingredients are present along with a number of confessional blends. For others, the avatar is steered away from plurality and into specific, known contexts. Instead of Århus Cathedral the avatar enters a virtual copy of an Anglican Cathedral. Instead of walking to the Mission House in Kibæk the avatar joins a prayer meeting lead by a woman from Quebec.

One might say that the remark in the introduction to the conference⁶ finds support: “A rethinking of the relationship between mission and ecclesiology has here proved to be crucial”. Mission organized and planned by ecclesiastical entities such as denominations and confessions can neither before nor after the 100 year anniversary of the World Mission Conference in Edinburgh 1910 be expected to achieve “evangelization of the world in this generation”. The inclination of missiology towards structural factors cannot be expected to lead to a deeper understanding of the actual turn of events when it comes to mission. In order to reach a deeper understanding missiology might be advised to turn to action analyses, in the physical or the virtual world, since they are parallels and counterparts of one another.

The advice from the field of avatar analysis to denominations and churches engaging in mission in order to cooperate towards the goal “evangelization of the world in this generation” is simple: Since a significant part of people’s lives and actions is situated in virtual worlds, churches and denominations ought to be there too. The most important thing might not be to build (virtual) houses and offices. The crucial mission factor – like in the Latin American case – seems to be that a social community strengthens the possibilities of the avatar/individual to solve her everyday life problems.

References


⁶ www.teo.au.dk/churchandmission/callforpapers, January 20th, 2010


