Religion, informatization of society and power: Socio-Philosophical Analysis

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Abstract. The paper examines transformational changes in contemporary society through a lens of religious discourse, power relations and digital environment of society. The paper aims to explore the background of digital changes taking place in a social environment, the way they contribute to the “informatization” of societies, states, governments, and religions. The problem stated in line with the research questions update the idea of philosophical analysis to evaluate paradigm social shifts. A problem-based approach relies on systems analysis applied to grasp an overview of trends through our understanding of a digital trigger actuating societal developments. The paper shows that a “mega-shift from industrial to digital society” resulted in a new social environment and, successively, to a “restructuring of power relations” with digital religion to replace conventional religion. The findings showed that religion and power being social phenomena developing in a digitalized world do not lose their systemic mutual interaction. However, it is clear that the relationship between these social phenomena is becoming more and more technology-driven. To analyze a religion-power relationship in a digital society, there is still no convincing theoretical model.

Keywords: religion, power, informatization of society, digital religion, network communication, system-based approach

1 Introduction

The twentieth century, and the twenty-first century that followed, is characterized by hitherto unprecedented progress in all spheres of life, especially politics and economy. It made a quantum leap in the last decades of the twentieth century, stemming from the development of the information society. These transformations were reviewed by philosophers, political scientists, and economists.

Among the ten major transformations of contemporary society identified by J. Naisbitt, he highlights the “mega-shift from an industrial society to an informational society” [1]. The very concept of information society was introduced by the Japanese theorist K. Koyama. Based on his writings, in 1972 Japan adopted The Plan for Information Society: a National Goal toward Year 2000. I. Masuda, O. Toffler, J. Naisbitt and others played an important role in developing the idea of information society. According to the theory of information society, it is information that constitutes a key factor of production, far superior to the production of goods and services. This theory lays emphasis on knowledge, information and interactive communications.

Many claim that transition to information society is a socio-ontological shift, the development of a new social environment too difficult for previous generations to understand. The onset of information revolution, or, more precisely, an impetus to start it, was a science considered to be originated by N. Wiener. It is referred to as cybernetics. Later, digital technologies were developed, microprocessors were invented, and fundamentally new communication systems were produced. All this and much more culminated in “information revolution”. The information society develops at different levels: individual, group, state and international.

2 Materials and Methods

What are the specific features comprising the information society?

Encouraged by the information society, sociability at large is being transformed. M. Castells writes: “Emerging social structures concerned suggest the following conclusion: in the information age, a historical trend leads to the fact that the dominant functions and processes are increasingly structured around networks. It is networks that make up a new morphology of our societies, and those disseminating a “network” rationale contribute significantly to fundamental changes in production, everyday life, culture and power” [2].

What happens to the phenomenon of power in the information society?
M. Castells writes that “the morphology of networks acts as a source of far-reaching restructuring of power relations. The “switches” connected to the networks (when financial structures of a certain empire start to control the media influencing political processes) are geared to exercise power, being available only to a select few. Whoever controls a switch has the power” [2]. Global informatization, put at the service of globalism, contains a powerful potential to undermine the state and national cultural identity.

Is religious discourse changing with the digitalization of society?

Almost simultaneously with the release of M. Castells’ famous book The Rise of the Network Society (1996), the American researcher S. O’Leary suggested that in the future a networked society will provoke new online religions, whereas conventional religions will change significantly, being sensitive to the impact of technology [3]. A range of new phenomena has been investigated including online discourses (L. Dawson, K. Douglas) and network group affiliations of religious online communities (H. Campbell), features of religious online identification (M. Lövheim, A. Linderman), construction of new ritual online practices (K. Radde-Antweiler) [4].

The paper rests on a system-based approach enabling to consider the current society as a system composed of a complex of interrelated elements including religion, power and information. The approach is mainly based on integrity, hierarchy, structuring and multiplicity.

A methodological kit is based on the publications of I. Prigozhin, G. Haken, as well as the writings of K. Marx as a herald of the system-based approach. Of great importance is the contribution of M. Castells to the development of the system-network approach by which the networked society functions as a dynamic open system that allows innovations without losing balance.

3 Results and Discussion

J. Naisbitt sees a specific character of the information society in the following. “In an industrial society,” he writes, “capital is deemed to be a strategic resource. […] However, in our new society, as Daniel Bell first emphasized, information is a strategic resource. Not the only resource, but the most important” [1]. In the information economy, there is a surplus value discovered by K. Marx. This is a different kind of surplus value, though. It is a knowledge-driven surplus value. Thus, the information society is a knowledge society. Naisbitt identifies a number of parameters by which the emerging information society can be distinguished from the industrial society. He writes: “Here are five benchmarks to depict the transition from an industrial society to an information society that should be remembered:

- The information society is an economic truth, not a mental abstraction.
- Communications and computer technology innovations will speed up changes by reducing informational float times to zero.
- New information technology will first be employed to deal with old industrial challenges, and then spawn new activities, processes and products.
- In a highly literate society that requires basic reading and writing skills more than ever, current education system is making an incredibly poor-quality product.
- The technology of the new information age is not an utter guarantee of success. It will succeed or fail designed on the principle “technological progress – spiritual comfort” [1].

It is clear that J. Naisbitt does not claim that the information society has already been fully structured. He only claims that this society is being structured, but it is a stage of development when there is no return to the prior way of life. In our opinion, this position is true. Even in highly developed countries, the information society has not been entirely established so far, and as for most regions around the globe, it has not got access yet. This requires a total computerization of those societies.

Certainly, it makes sense to talk about the steady development of a new social environment that has generated such intrinsic concepts as “cyberspace”, “cybersociety”, “digital religion”, “virtual communities”, “networked society”, “virtual reality”, etc. Perhaps a key concept for comprehending the idea of information society is the concept of virtual reality. In Medieval Latin, virtus means “possible”.

Encouraged by the information society, sociability at large is being transformed. M. Castells writes: “Based on a series of studies, emerging social structures concerned suggest the following conclusion: in the information age, a historical trend leads to the fact that the dominant functions and processes are increasingly structured around networks. It is networks that make up a new morphology of our societies, and those disseminating a “networked” rationale contributes significantly to fundamental changes in production, everyday life, culture and power”. Castells claims that networked social organization used to exist before in human history, but it has now begun to permeate all areas of society. Networks are open structures capable of unlimited expansion. B. Wellman writes: “Communities, at least in terms of traditional sociological research, have always been grouped around common values and social organization. Networks, on the contrary, are built to meet personal choices and personal strategy of social participants, whether they are individuals, families or social groups” [5]. The Canadian sociologist M. McLuhan in his book The Guttenberg Galaxy proposed the concept of “global village”, which means “the ability to live and act locally, but to think globally and be included in the global infrastructure…” [6].

Once continuing to exist, the real society is, as it were, duplicated by creating a virtual twin. Social space in the realm of virtual reality is replaced by virtual space. Through virtual reality, social reality is replaced by its computer simulations. Plunging into virtual reality, the individual begins to interact with simulations rather than people and objects. The processes of informatization
entail transformations in the structure of social space. The role of geographical space is decreasing whereas the role of information space is increasing. The time for information exchange is reduced. Relations between people are largely becoming independent of state borders. However, informatization has not only positive but also negative aspects. Information and communication technology reduce live communication between people and replace it by its virtual surrogates. Society is being virtually destructured, atomized, but not only in reality, as is the case in classical bourgeois society, but also virtually. The individual joins various virtual groups, but remains actually isolated from other people. But not only that. The Internet has given rise to hacking, computer espionage. Through the Internet, it is possible to unite not only certain groups for some peaceful interests, but also terrorists. Some theorists of the information society excessively idealize it. For example, J. Naisbitt writes: "The new source of power is not money in the hands of a few, but information in the hands of many" [1]. In fact, the situation – at least for the time being – looks completely different, namely that money in the hands of a few ensures the availability of information in these hands as well. This is the truth of capitalism, no matter how it is modified.

What happens to the phenomenon of power in the information society?

Today they talk about electronic government (e-Government). Wikipedia suggests that e-government does not replace, supplement or even replicate real government. It “only defines a new way of interacting implying an active use of information and communication technology to improve the delivery of public services”. It provides these services to citizens, businesses, government officials, and other branches of government. They do not simulate services, but they are quite true.

Western researchers write that “the morphology of networks is viewed as a source of far-reaching restructuring of power relations”. The cited M. Castells writes that power “in its current form ... is gradually fading away: this kind of power is becoming more and more ineffective in terms of the interests it is supposed to serve” [7]. He further writes: “Where are the centers of power embedded in this social structure? And what is power in such historical conditions? ...Power is no longer the domain of institutions (the state), organizations (capitalist firms) or symbolic bearers (corporate media and the church). It diffuses through global networks of wealth, power, information and images that circulate and mutate in an evolving configuration not tied to any particular geographic location. However, power does not fade away. Power still rules society, defines our lives and dominates us” [7].

Some authors believe that integration of a nation state in the global information and communication network is clearly a factor in strengthening tolerance in international relations. This is far from always the case. Certainly, the roll-out of information and communication systems demonstrates the degree of integration of the nation state into the world community, thereby raising its international status. However, the involvement and even dominance of the state in communication networks is not identical to the total transparency of real relations. Each state has its own interests that do not always match the interests of other states, and therefore are not shown off. In our opinion, those authors who believe that global informatization poses a threat to national identity are more right. Thus, M. Price writes that globalization “has a capacity to create a public sphere outside the borders of the nation state and, possibly, against this state” [8].

It was in the 21st century that a new phenomenon referred to as the information warfare emerged, and therefore, a new need came up for information security of the state and society. In this situation, it is very important to coordinate all three levels of power – macro-, meso- and micro-power. A particular attention should be drawn to meso-power, since it is the least reliable level. With the advent of information and communication technologies, it is possible to influence the representatives of different levels of power of the nation state, especially, representatives of power in the information space, bypassing official authorities and channels.

Thus, the transition from “ordinary” to information society, although it specifically modifies the functioning of state power, does not cause radical transformations. Besides the processes of “informatization” of society and the state, one of the main trends of today is digitalization of religion.

Is religious discourse changing with the digitalization of society?

The concept of “digital” or “networked religion” is commonly understood as the functioning of online religion that gives an insight into general characteristics and current trends of religious practice in the online community.

According to G. Grieve, on the one hand, digital religion includes various artifacts such as digital audio, video, computer games, as well as digital media such as e-mail websites, social networks, multiplayer games. Through media technologies, new unique characteristics of the religious online environment are starting up, including hypertextuality, interactivity, dispersion, polycentricity [3]. Getting aware of the way new media (virtual worlds, the Internet, blogs, social networks and mobile phones) are being used by religious groups, organizations and individuals can show the way social and behavioral changes are expressed in the twenty-first century. The heavy use of new media is assumed to have had a direct impact on religious identity, communities and practices both online and offline. For many, the use of new media allows daily engagement in religion; the use of new media for religious purposes may affect the conventional religion, attitudes and behavior of users [9].

However, digital religion is not at all alike a simple process of mediatizing traditional religious symbols and reproducing them on new media. Digital religion is unique, by channeling the fears generated by fluid modernity, synthesizing religious meta-narratives and the ideology of the digital society into a single whole through digital media technologies [3]. Developing digital religions is a kind of process of “hybridization” of culture, during which secularized consciousness, relying
on some symbolic resources of historical memory, the variety of rituals, meanings and ideas of the past, actually invents new “traditions”, trying to overcome, through spontaneous mythmaking, the growing sense of alienation and fear of an unknown future. Thus, digital religion is becoming an independent phenomenon [3].

According to H. Campbell’s conception of networked religion, network topology changes the structure of religion, with a huge role attributed to media communications. A.V. Ivanov argues that the phenomenon of digital religion embodies fundamental transformations, rather than technological innovations, associated with a modified appreciation of religious experience, values, mechanisms of religious leadership, distribution of authority and power, as well as methods of recruitment and affiliation within confessional communities.

K. Landby’s conception of mediatization addresses the internal mechanisms coordinating the relationship between social communication and sacred dimensions of digital religion, which is promoted by the type of communication, its form. However, religion as such can have a reverse effect on the media sphere, its technologies, acting as a symbolic basis for changes, and then religion “becomes part of the sociotechnical space” [10].

M. Castells identifies five constitutive characteristics of digital religion: 1) network structure, 2) constructed identity, 3) departure from the concept of conventional religious authority, 4) convergence of religious practices, 5) multidimensionality of religious reality (Castells, 1999).

All in all, digital religion is not something unique, but merely reflects a new shift in the development of media culture, focusing on the dematerialization of religion, the replacement of traditional material media with virtual signs.

Thus, the phenomenon of digital religion can be interpreted as an independent symbolic environment emerging at the intersection of traditional culture and postmodern digitalized communication environment. A question is to what degree these spheres are interpenetrated and cross-pollinated. How is the role of religious authority changing? Digital religion is an integral part of a post-industrial society, in which the religious sphere, its narratives and symbolic structures, being freed from the power of former authorities and dogmas, begins to be constructed rapidly by communities that are in need for a new spiritual experience that goes beyond the earlier institutional norms [3].

The transformations of religious power and authority are expressed in a way that the very arrival of network communications poses a threat to hierarchical forms of power in traditional religions, provokes competition between old religious institutions and new non-institutionalized network structures.

A number of experts believe that the information and political pressure of transnational clans, their self-interests are driving religious movements into the global religion that is currently being built: the One World Order being formed brings with it the One Religion.

4 Conclusion

Like power, religion is social and develops historically from the most archaic to the most sophisticated and differentiated forms. Religion is used by power as one of the tools of social control. The freer the society, the softer the forms of control, the broader the range of individual freedoms. A question is still open and debatable as to what will change in these relations in a digital society. One thing is clear, that religious and power relations in the social system circulate through network channels and change with an evolving configuration, fundamentally modifying research approaches.

Throughout history, religion-society and church-state relationships are known to take various institutional forms that are represented by a fairly large number of models. The most significant of them are theocratic; state church model; model of coexistence of church and state as two independent entities; the model of totalitarian state as a carrier of atheistic ideology, for which the church ceases to exist as an independent political entity. There is still no convincing theoretical model to analyze the “religion and power” problem in a digital society. The issue will be the subject of further research.

References

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